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ビブリア古書堂の事件手帖

～栄子さんと奇妙な客人たち～

ビブリア古書堂の事件手帖

ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSHOP BIBLIA'S CASE FILES

MISS SHIORIKO AND THE PECULIAR GUESTS

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Antiquarian Bookshop Biblio's Case Files

~Miss Shioriko and the Peculiar Guests~

Mikami En





Prologuepage 5

Chapter 1 - Sōseki Natsume "Sōseki's Complete Collection, New Edition" (Iwanami Shoten)page 11

Chapter 2 - Kiyoshi Koyama "Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen" (Shincho Paperback)page 89

Chapter 3 - Vinogradov/Kuzmin "Introduction to Logic" (Aoki Paperback)page 167

Chapter 4 - Osamu Dazai "The Late Years" (Sunagoya Bookstore)page 217

Epiloguepage 296



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PROLOGUE

On a certain day six years ago, I walked down the slopes of Kita-Kamakura, strolling through the narrow alley by the railway.

The sweat permeating my white t-shirt made it stick to my back. Cicadas, chirping incessantly, filled and irritated my ears, and hydrangeas could be seen everywhere. It was already summer after the rainy season, and the flowers would remain unwilted still.

Other than the surfer hobbyists, this was not a season the locals particularly liked. Though the beaches of Yuigahama and Enoshima were already open to the public, the middle and high school students here did not really want to play on the beaches nearby—all the tourists, as well as the strange corroded color in the water at high tide, made those places unattractive.

I was a second-year at the prefectural high school situated on the mountainside. It was a Sunday, but I had gone to school to retrieve a textbook I had forgotten and was just on my way home. I had always taken the bus to school, but I missed it this time, and since it only came each hour I had to make my way to the JR station to take the train. Kamakura was surrounded by mountains, and the roads here were narrow, which made certain areas incredibly inconvenient for transportation.

I could see the platform of Kita-Kamakura Station to my right. It was very long, and since the ticket gate was located on only one side, I had to take a lengthy walk around before I could enter.

There were rows of old residences on my left, and the trees that were planted in their courtyards were huge, and they showed an exuberant green.

Maybe not many know of this, or maybe they would not care about it even if they did—but there was a second-hand bookstore located along this alley.

This wooden house had been around for many years, but had never had a shop name put up. There was, at the shop entrance, merely an old signboard dangling in the breeze. On it, the words “Purchasing of old books, providing honest valuation” were inscribed with a showy hand. It could not spin much, probably due to its rust.

I was about to pass by that bookstore whose name I did not know.

However, something unexpected happened then. The timber-framed sliding door creaked open, and a young woman stepped out.

She was dressed in plain clothes that included a white sleeveless blouse and a long navy-blue skirt. Her long hair was braided behind her neck, and her tender white skin complimented large, dazzling black eyes. Her lips were thin in their place below her nose.

She was probably a little older than me. She looked different from anyone I knew, and really, her features would make any passerby do a double-take. However, she seemed also demure. Her lips were puckered like a little bird’s beak as she made a strange, rough sound.

“Su— Susu— Su—”

It took me a while before I managed to realize that she was trying to whistle. Perhaps she was an awkward person.

She pulled out a small cart from the old single-story wooden house. She seemed, by all appearances, like an employee of this second-hand bookstore about to open.

She did not stop to glance at me as I stood still beside her. She was focused on pushing the cart to its destination. A wooden plank with the sloppily handwritten words “A hundred yen each” was set on this cart, which was probably used to display the discounted books.

She was about to head back into the shop, but then suddenly laid eyes upon the signboard. She let out a soft sound—“Eh?”—and nudged the metal plate, which spun creakily. It stopped when the

back side of “Purchasing of old books, providing honest valuation” was facing the street.

“Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia”

I thought for a moment and realized that it was most likely the name of the shop. It was not nameless after all. She walked back into the shop with a bounce in each of her steps, without ever noticing me.

Who is she?

I remembered that the shop had been run single-handedly by a middle-aged man with greying hair. Had he hired a college student?

I made my way to the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia tentatively, and peeked into the dimly-lit shop through the glass panel of the sliding door. There was a cashier counter opposite the bookshelf, stacked with tall piles of books. I could see her behind them through the gaps. The girl was buried within the books, and currently she was reading through a particularly large one. From where I was, I could see her eyes beneath the spectacles; wide open, sparkling with brilliance. At times she chuckled, and at others she nodded her head hard. She never remained still.

She really loves to read.

I suppose that would be the very picture of losing yourself. Her actions might seem a little eccentric, but it was the first time I had seen someone so engrossed in reading books. You could say I was extremely envious. What was she reading? What was so interesting about it?

I placed my hand on the sliding door, but lost resolve before I could open it. What was the point of asking her those questions? I had no affinity for the printed word... the reason being my particular “condition”. Dejected, I left the entrance of the bookstore and trudged my way towards the station.

Her silhouette, which I had seen in the dim bookstore, hung in my

memory like a painting on a wall. As I made my way past the ticketing gates and onto the platform, there were several instances where I felt I had to turn back, that I had to go back to that shop and talk to her. That, however, did not happen.

I took the Yokosuka line to return home.

I did not feel that I could do anything that could reveal her smile. Only talented people could seize an encounter like this one, and an ordinary person would most likely let it slip by. I had merely done an ordinary thing for an ordinary person.

But even then, there were moments when I said to myself — *What if I'd gone in, said hi and got to know her? Maybe this is a fork in the road of my life, and now my life changes, for better or worse.*

Well, such presumptions were meaningless. Not to mention endless, if I kept dwelling on it.

Allow me to bring us out of this prologue.

This is a story involving old books. This would include the old books themselves as well as the the people connected to them.

These books, handed down as they were, not only had the stories on the page, but also the stories worn into their substance. Even if one of them had been traded, those stories would survive intact. Also, if I could, I would add that not all of these “stories” were wonderful. Some might be so heinous that none would want to recall them, but they were just another piece of the world’s existence.

My name is Daisuke Goura. I am 23 this year. The old books connected to me were none other than Sōseki’s Complete Collection.

Well then, please allow me to tell you my story.

CHAPTER 1

NATSUME SŌSEKI, SŌSEKI'S COMPLETE COLLECTION, NEW EDITION (IWANAMI SHOTEN)



Chapter 1
Sōseki Natsume "Sōseki's Complete Collection, New Edition" (Iwanami Shoten)

Ever since I was young, I have always struggled with reading.

Books with printed text were especially bad for me. After long periods of constantly flipping through the pages, reading the words one by one, I would somehow get so frustrated. My heart seemed to scream as it pounded in my chest, and my palms would be covered in sweat. In the end, I always wound up in a terrible mood. You could say that I had bibliophobia...

As a result, I suffered endlessly in school. Regardless of the subject, textbooks would always have printed type in them. Taking notes during lessons was alright, but my English and Modern Language grades were horrible, since I had to memorize passages from the textbooks. I could feel the hairs on my neck stand on end whenever I heard the phrase “reading comprehension”.

I told my teachers and my mother about my problem, but all I got was advice. They told me it couldn’t be helped that I hated books. They also said that I shouldn’t worry too much about it anyway; everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses.

I was really grateful for the reassurance, but it was a total misinterpretation of my problem. I didn’t hate reading books; I just couldn’t keep reading even if I wanted to. Whenever I started to read, my body started to resist.

This misunderstanding was never cleared up, and it was only partly because I was bad at explaining. I also looked nothing like the type to enjoy reading. Wherever I went, my large, tall, muscular figure stood out. Anyone who saw me would think that I was of a tough sort. I would often be invited to join sports clubs, and I was always chosen for games, meets, and sports festivals.

But I had no real interest in sports. I wanted to read. I often took up being a library committee member, and I never believed tidying up the library books was tedious like everyone else thought it was. I enjoyed looking down from one end of the bookshelf, admiring the rows and rows of book spines. There was no problem if I merely

imagined the contents instead of opening the pages.

By the way, this “condition” of mine did not emerge naturally. My fear of books comes from somewhere; it is a story about Sōseki’s complete works, and a prelude to my own story.

It was something that happened before I entered primary school. On a drizzly day in spring, I was reading alone in the living room on the second floor.

I suppose I should introduce my home.

My home is in Ofuna, a place located right between the cities of Yokohama and Kamakura. It is a must-see attraction for tourists riding the East Japan Railway Company line from Tokyo.

There was a great statue of the Buddhist deity Guanyin on the hill near Ofuna station^{|1|}. It looked very impressive when lit by night, but when you glimpsed it through the trees, the stark white face was somewhat frightening.

However, aside from the endless vigil of the Guanyin, Ofuna was a rather plain town.

There had been another treasure once besides the Guanyin statue. It was a cinematography studio, one of the rare few in Japan. It was abandoned by the time I entered middle school, but my grandmother spoke of it often. It had apparently been a keystone of the Golden Age of Japanese Film, but I knew nothing about that. I was unfamiliar with movies.

My house was located beside the cinematography studio. It was called the “Goura Eatery”, but the Goura family’s specialty dish was nothing special: pork cutlets on rice, with green peas and pickles.

My great grandfather had opened this restaurant with my grandmother taking over afterward. In the past, the film studio’s staff would come to eat and our shop was always alive with activity. But by the time I grew up, our shop’s once bustling business had

since withered away.

The shop's reputation was not bad, but fewer and fewer staff came to eat in the same way that the studio made fewer and fewer films. In the end, my grandmother fired her workers and ran the shop alone.

My grandmother, my mother, and I—we all lived in the second floor above the restaurant. My father had died before I was born, and my mother gave birth to me when she came back to her hometown of Ofuna. Incidentally, my grandmother gave me the name "Daisuke".

Since my mother worked at a food company in Yokohama, my grandmother was in charge of my upbringing. She would lecture me ten times for every single mistake I made, from day-to-day chores to how deeply I bowed. I was the only grandchild, but I don't recall ever being pampered.

My grandmother looked kind and she had an ample chin. But her stare was as intense as the Guanyin's on the hill.

Anyway, as I was saying. On that drizzly day in spring, I had gone to the living room on the second floor to look for picture books. I remember that one book I liked was "Guri and Gura". Up until then, I was still an obedient boy who loved to read. I read not only picture books, but also a few children's books written in simple language. I remember harassing the grown-ups to buy me new books whenever we went to the bookshop.

That spring day, I had tired of all the books at home. I felt bored. Lunchtime was ending, and the customer's chatter and the blare of the television floated up from downstairs. I wanted to go outside, but it was impossible with such rain.

I walked out of the living room towards my grandmother's room at the end of the corridor. It was a Japanese style room, facing north with an extremely low ceiling that made it feel cramped. (Our house had gone through many building extensions, so the layout of the

rooms was somewhat inconsistent.)

Though my grandmother had told me not to enter her room without permission, I did it anyway—to look for books.

There was a large bookshelf along the wall with grandmother's books in it. It seemed that my grandmother, the equal of the Guanyin Bodhisattva, was once a lovely girl enamored with literature. I heard that in her youth she spent almost all the pocket money she earned at the restaurant on books.

The books my grandmother collected were mostly old Japanese texts from the Meiji and the Taisho eras, and I was too young to understand their contents. But with so many books, I thought that she might have some books for children, too. I arrived with high expectations.

I pulled books out one after another, checking the contents inside. I did not understand kanji at the time, and I tossed the books aside on the floor without bothering to put them back. In the end, no one could tell if I had been looking a book or if I was only making a mess.

Once I created openings all over the bookshelf, I noticed a box at the lowest level filled with pocket-sized books. Since they were small, I thought they might have been children's books, and brought my face closer to read. The names were printed on the backs, but unfortunately they were mostly kanji. There was only one book with a hiragana title. I slowly read it aloud:

And Then

What kind of book was it? Just as I was pulling the stack out from the shelf—

“What are you doing?”

A deep voice bellowed from above, shocking me thoroughly. I looked back and saw my grandmother standing there in cooking attire. She glared down at me. When had she come up here? Her long narrow eyes, so like the Guanyin Bodhisattva |2|, terrified my younger self.

I sat down on the tatami mat, the books all strewn around me.

My grandmother had said another thing after warning me not to enter her room. I recalled it now—*even if you enter, you are not allowed to touch the books on the shelf. They are what I treasure most.*

I knew what I had to do. My grandmother was strict, but I would be forgiven if I apologized sincerely. That had been the case the time I lined up the restaurant chairs into a tunnel. I sat in proper seiza position and lowered my head.

I didn’t expect my grandmother’s reaction. She grabbed my shoulders violently and slapped me twice, stunning me. She continued ruthlessly, striking me with all the strength of an adult. My arms and legs slammed into the pile of books, and before I could even cry, she lifted me up. I nearly wet my pants at the sight of the Guanyin Bodhisattva’s terrifying sanpaku eyes. That was the first time I had been beaten by my grandmother, and the last.

“...You are not allowed to read these books,”

Grandmother said hoarsely. “If you make this mistake again, you won’t be a child of our house any longer.”

I nodded my head weakly.

It was only when I became an adult that I considered this the reason behind my current “condition”. Of course, I cannot say for sure. I’m no psychologist.

But it is true that ever since I incurred my grandmother’s imperial wrath, I had been rendered unable to read print. And naturally I never entered her room afterward.

I do not know when my grandmother first noticed the change. For years, we never talked about the incident. Perhaps it was a painful memory for her as well.

It was more than fifteen years before we spoke of it again. My grandmother had been admitted to a nearby hospital, and I had come to visit.

All of a sudden she began to speak of this old thing.

“...that time I hit you...” she began.

“I was so shocked to see you in my room back then. You’d never gone in before, had you?”

She made it sound like it had happened a week ago, and it took me a while to even process what she was talking about.

We were different than how we had been fifteen years ago, both my grandmother and me. I had grown extraordinarily tall through puberty, while my grandmother, already short, became ever thinner and frailer. As her health worsened, the shop would take breaks from business more and more frequently.

We were headed into the rainy season and water was pouring down outside. Whenever the seasons changed, my grandmother’s migraines would start to act up. This time she wasn’t recovering on her own, so she was admitted to a hospital where they could take a look at her. I was at my busiest back then. I was looking for a job at the time and had visited her in the hospital right after an informational seminar with a company. It was talking about something that happened when I was five while I was still wearing

that suit.

“I didn’t plan on hitting you at first. It was my fault, I suppose.”

I saw how lucid my grandmother’s eyes were, and I felt that the atmosphere had somewhat darkened.

“No, that was my fault,” I replied. “I came in without permission. Don’t worry about it.”

I never bore any grudge against her for that. It had been the first and last time she hit me. But the expression she wore remained unhappy.

“I often thought about how if you could read, your life would be so different,” she said.

I rubbed my eyebrows. Yes, perhaps. During my time at university, I gave up my insistence on reading books and accepted an invitation to the judo club. Over those four years, I attained a respectable 3rd Dan ^{|3|} ranking, and for my weight division I was ranked one of the highest in the district tournament. I suppose that I had gotten stronger from that. My neck and shoulders had become very sturdy.

“...It doesn’t matter that I can’t read books.”

Or so I said. But it was a half-truth. Certainly, my university life had been fulfilling—but certainly, it could have been very different.

“Is that so?”

Grandmother sighed as she closed her eyes. I thought that she was drifting to sleep, but after a while she started to talk again.

“...What sort of person will you marry?”

“Huh?”

The change in topic was so sudden, and I was taken aback yet again. Just like when she started talking about beating me at five years old, her words were so strange as to be momentarily incomprehensible. The whole situation was just strange.

“It’s too early to talk about marriage,” I said, looking towards the open door. Maybe it would be a good idea to call to one of the nurses passing by.

“It might be nice for you to marry a girl who likes books. You can’t read them, but she’ll definitely tell you all sorts of interesting things about them...well, but it’d be hard to make that work. Bookworms mostly attract other bookworms,” she said teasingly.

I did not know whether she was joking, or if her consciousness was just drifting somewhere out of this world.

She seemed to remember something as she added, “...Once I die, I’ll leave all my books to you two to handle as you please.”

I felt like my face was splashed with cold water. I wasn’t ever a person who could put on a calm front and adapt to the situation quickly.

“Wh-what are you saying...isn’t this too early?” I muttered softly.

My grandfather and my father had died before I was born, so this was the first time I ever heard kin of mine say things like this. Grandmother closed her eyes as she gave a wry smile. Apparently she was picking up the anxiety written all over my face.

The examination had revealed a tumor in her brain, and she did not have much time before her death. I didn’t tell her this, but she probably knew from my and my mother’s attitudes. I was not going to fool the eyes of Guanyin Bodhisattva.

I finally understood what my grandmother was trying to tell me.

These words were ones she wanted her grandson to hear before it happened—her last words.

By the time I thought again about my grandmother’s books, it had been more than a year after the funeral—the midsummer of August 2010.

After graduating university, I kept living at my house in Ofuna. At noon I finally managed to get out of bed, and as I did, I heard my mother yelling for me outside the house.

“Come down here, Dai-needajob.”

I was puzzled as to why my mother was home. She would normally be at her company right now. But then I realized it was Sunday—honestly, I could not seem to tell the difference between Sunday and any other day since I graduated.

Yawning, I walked out of the room and saw that the door at the end of the corridor was open. Mom must have been in Grandmother’s Japanese-style room.

“Ow.”

My forehead hit the door frame hard when I tried to enter. The beam creaked.

“What are you doing, Dai-needajob? Stop wrecking the house.”

Mom stood in the middle of the room. Her head nearly brushed against the lampshade on the ceiling. Though she isn’t as tall as me, she still is taller than average.

“The door frame here is really low,” I retorted, holding my head.

(I mentioned earlier that due to the many expansions we made to the house, the layout of all the rooms became a little weird. The frame is only a few centimeters lower, but it’s still a meaningful difference.)

“The sleep’s still in your eyes,” said Mom. “Nobody’s hit the frame before.”

I don’t think so. There is some black duct tape fastened to the door frame, and it’s been there since before I cared to inspect it. Someone has to have walked into it before. It’s too sad to think that only I have ever been this careless.

“I’m cleaning up the stuff your grandmother left behind...” she

began, and then paused, sighing. “Well, having two tall people in here is just downright unpleasant. Let’s sit down.”

And so I sat down cross-legged as I faced my mother, who sat in seiza. She has a wide chin, long narrow eyes, and a habit of remorseless cruelty. Height aside, she is basically a chip off my grandmother’s block. Mom has two older sisters, my aunts, and she resembles my grandmother most between them.

But she doesn’t seem too happy about inheriting any traits from my grandmother. She’s probably fuming, actually, because they look identical. I have never seen Mom talk with Grandmother calmly for more than five minutes. She probably left home to work instead of taking over the Goura Eatery because she wanted to avoid meeting Grandmother too much.

“The anniversary of your grandmother’s death has passed,” said Mom. “I’ve been packing up her things and wondering what to do with them.”

It’s just as she says. Upright cardboard boxes sat all around us, their tops folded. My grandmother’s clothes and jewelry were already divided amongst our aunts, and everything else in the house remained untouched. This messy scene made me remember being five years old in this room. To banish the thought, I swept my eyes around the room. Then I noticed something important.

“Where are her books?”

The bookshelf covered the entire wall, but it was empty. Not a single book was left behind.

“The books are over here,” said Mom. “I did say that I’ve been packing up her things, didn’t I? Are you listening?”

Mom knocked on a few boxes beside her.

“Isn’t there a nursing home on the corner of Sekiya?” she asked. “I’ve got an acquaintance there, building some sort of reading room. So lately he’s been collecting books. He was delighted when I

offered him the books in our house, saying that he wants as many as he can get. I told him that I'd just send over our very own home-living slacker, Dai-needajob.”

“Why do you call me that around other people?” I groaned.

Of course, “Dai-needajob” will refer to me. The Dai in Daisuke is appended to “Need a Job”, and she actually calls me by this nickname in front of all sorts of people.

“But it's true. You slack at home and you don't work.”

“...It's not like I want to slack and not work,” I muttered.

I still have not found a job. I did receive a job offer from a construction company in Yokohama, but the company closed down in February of this year. I'm still attending some inauguration exercises even now, but I just never can get through to the interview stage. I'm not a student of any famous or prestigious university, I have no real specialty other than my physique. And the economic downturn just makes it all worse.

“You're being too picky here,” she chided. “Try taking the JSDF's acceptance tests, or the police's. You did inherit my strong body, so you should do something with it.”

I did not answer. This isn't the first time I've been advised to try for the JSDF or the police. My dan in judo helps, but after 4 years of the sport, I clearly understand that I'm not someone who fights to win. I don't find those jobs out of my league physically, but I want a simpler occupation than having to ensure the safety of the people, or the peace in the country.

“About the books,” I said, changing the topic. I pushed this talk about civil service jobs to the back of my mind for now.

“Grandmother really treasured these books,” I said. “You don't have to donate them all...”

“There's no problem,” said Mom brusquely. “She said 'Once I die, I'll leave my books to you', or didn't you hear her?”

“I did, but she wouldn’t want us to treat them like this...”

I thought Grandmother’s intention was to let us share the books, as long as we cherished them. However, mom merely shook her head hard.

“Come on, Daisuke. Her catchphrase is basically ‘*you can’t take anything with you when you go*’. It was the same when your grandfather died; she dealt with his leftovers without feeling sentimental. That’s how she is.”

Now that I think about it, I don’t recall Grandmother preserving anything of my grandfather’s. He died a long time ago. I heard it was when mom first entered elementary school. He got into a traffic accident on one hot summer day, no different from the one presently outside the window. He had been returning from the Kawasaki Temple⁴.

“I admit things would be different if you would read them,” said Mom. “Will you read these books?”

No, I won’t. I can’t. If I kept them, they’d just be put on display anyway. It might be good to give them to someone who would read them.

“Then, how about I drive and deliver them?” I suggested.

I quickly looked around the room. The books were not put away, but rather scattered all over the tatami. I had to box them up before I left.

“Sure. But before you leave, there’s something I want to discuss with you.”

Mom lifted a set of books beside her and placed it before me. There were approximately 30 books in total, and each one was smaller and thinner than your usual book—the size of a single shonen manga volume.

I felt as if a barb had dug into me. The memories came rushing back; these were definitely the same set of books I was looking at

back then, but now I noticed the name of the books. “Sōseki’s Complete Collection”. This set included ***And Then***, by Natsume Sōseki.

“I thought she might had some personal savings she forgot in her books, so I opened them all up, one by one.”

So that was what she was doing with these books. Mom ignored my surprise, took out a book from the case entitled ***Volume Eight: And Then***, and showed me the reverse side of its thin wax paper cover.

“See, I found this!”

On the right of this normally blank space, thin brushstrokes were arranged in straight lines. The words weren’t really elegant, and the balance and spacing between each letter was delicately uneven:

Natsume Sōseki

To Mr. Tanaka Yoshio.

These were the only two lines there. “Natsume Sōseki” was written right in the middle, while “To Mr. Tanaka Yoshio” was near the filing.

“This is Natsume Sōseki’s signature, right? It’ll be amazing if it’s the real thing!” exclaimed Mom, her eyes dazzling.

I just couldn’t summon the enthusiasm. It really would be amazing, if it were real, but it’s whatever if it’s just a fake.

I took the book, flipped it open, and the stench of old paper filled the air. I felt a chill in my heart upon seeing the text laid out; I frantically flipped to the last page and found the publishing date at the top edge. It was the year Showa 31, July 27th, and the publisher was Iwanami Shoten.

“...It’s the year before grandmother was married.”

I was puzzled. Was Natsume Sōseki still alive at that time? I thought that he died a long time ago.

“Who’s this Tanaka person?”

My grandmother's name, Goura Kinuko, was completely different. If Natsume Sōseki really signed out to this person, why did these books end up in my grandmother's hands?

"I don't know either," Mom remarked. "Maybe the previous owner wrote that. The book does look like it came from an old bookstore."

Mom reached her hand out and flipped through the pages. There was a bookmark the size of a business card placed inside, and written on it seemed to be the price of the whole collection. The writing was a little faded, but the words could be distinguished as "34 volumes, first edition, 3500 yen". I'm not too sure of prices in the old days, but if it's an entire book collection, isn't this just inexpensive? If it was something someone wrote as a prank—

I gasped.

On the corner of the price card, it said "Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia". My mind immediately thought of a a beautiful profile in a slightly dim shop, bent over a book. It was the bookstore near my high school.

"I want to know how much worth these books have. If they're collector's items, we shouldn't give them away. But I don't know of anyone who could tell," sighed Mom. "Do you?"

I got off my scooter near the Kita-Kamakura Station and put my helmet under the seat.

From the basket at the front of the scooter, I took a shopping bag carrying "Sōseki's Complete Collection". After many years, I stood in front of the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. The surroundings had not changed since my time in High School, just like how I had not. There was a narrow alley too small for a car, an old wooden house, a store display, rusted and swinging, and not many pedestrians to be seen.

This shop had probably been around since my grandmother's youth. It must have been impossible for a girl born into a diner to

save enough pocket money to buy new books. She was able to collect so many because she could get old ones cheaply at stores like this. Or so I thought all of a sudden; a seemingly natural place for my thoughts to wander.

I came here to have the owner of the shop appraise “Sōseki’s Complete Collection”, and also to ask if my grandmother really came here. I was additionally a little hopeful to get to know something about that beautiful girl I saw in my second year of high school.

For six years after that day I would look into the shop each time I passed, but my eyes only ever came upon the white-haired shopkeeper, glowering as he paced the store. Of course, it would have been awkward to simply walk in for no other reason than to ask about her. However, I had some proper business to deal with today, so an inquiry should be no problem.

On the sliding door of this old bookstore hung a sign that announced “we are open”. I glanced inside and found it to be the same, now as always. I saw several large bookshelves and a counter opposite them.

Someone sat behind the counter.

It was not the aloof shop owner, but appeared instead to be a young, small girl. She had her head lowered and I couldn’t see her face. I felt my body heat up to think that this might be the person I had seen back then, and before I realized it, I opened the sliding door. Its sound was audible.

The shop attendant lifted her head, and my surging temperature ebbed a little. Her eyes were wide under a short fringe, and her skin was tanned like an elementary school student on summer break, dressed by a white top that recalled a high schooler’s uniform. She looked different from the girl from before. They were not the same person.

A high school student working part time, or perhaps the owner’s

daughter. Their faces had a distinct resemblance. She looked over at the paper bag in my hands.

“Ah, are you here to buy some old books?”

Her welcome was very lively. No, I wasn’t here to buy or sell, but just to appraise the value of this collection with a signature inside. Perhaps this is rude of me.

Regardless, turning back now would be awkward. I decided to ask her about it anyway.

I noted that between the bookshelves, still more books were stacked all on the floor, and it would impossible for someone my size to go down the aisle. What’s more, it was practically impossible for anyone to get to the books at the bottom shelves; how is a customer supposed to buy books here in the first place?

The girl stood up from behind the counter. She looked younger than me, and her blouse and skirt were from my alma mater. Judging from her school dress, even though they were in summer vacation, she probably had some club activities this morning.

“...I’m not here to buy old books,” I said after a moment, “but to ask you to help me check something. Is that alright? It’s about these books. My grandmother bought them from here.”

I paused to let her respond, but she simply waited for me to continue. I put the paper bag with the “Sōseki’s Complete Collection” on the table and took out *Volume Eight: And Then*, removing the book from its wax paper sleeve. I showed her the sleeve’s reverse side, and she narrowed her eyes as she brought her face close to it.

“The signature,” I said.

“Wow! It says Natsume Sōseki! Is this the real thing?”

For an instant, I didn’t know to respond. I never thought she’d be asking me my own question.

“Haven’t got a clue,” I said. “This is why I’m here.”

“Oh, I see... hm, what should I do?”

The girl folded her arms as her eyes met mine. Is she going to be asking all the questions here?

“...You can’t tell if this is the real thing?”

“Ah, it doesn’t look like we can. The shopkeeper’s not here, and I’m not sure how I’d be able to tell something like that.”

Her response was unwavering.

“When will the shopkeeper be back?”

The moment I asked, the girl gave a frown, and her eyebrows touched.

“...The shopkeeper’s hospitalized at the moment.”

She lowered her voice a little. Now that she mentioned it, the shop does look like it should be closed. I guess the shopkeeper isn’t feeling too well.

“Illness, then?”

“No... well, it was a leg injury...” she said. “If anyone sends books here, I’ll have to bring it to the hospital so it can be appraised. Man, this is so annoying!”

The explanation had become a little rant all of a sudden. In any case, I was a little shocked to learn that the owner was still working even from the hospital. Can this old bookstore really run like that?

“But it’s at Ofuna General, so it’s not too far,” she said. “By bike, it’s a 15 minute ride from here.”

“...Ah, so it’s there,” I muttered.

I couldn’t help the quiet outburst. It was near my house, and whenever someone mentioned any hospital in conversation, I immediately thought of the Ofuna General Hospital. There my mother gave birth to me, and there my grandmother died.

“Anyway, just leave them here for now,” she said. “I still have club

activities this summer, and I don't know if I can take a trip to the hospital anytime soon. Is it alright if it takes a little while?"

I thought about it. It's kind of a pain to demand that she go to the hospital now, since I'm not selling them if it's the real thing. It would be inconvenient for her to have to bring them back and forth.

Before I could tell her, she asked, "Erm, do you by chance visit Ofuna General often?"

After a moment, I said, "It's near my house."

Her expression immediately brightened.

"Well then! How about you head to the hospital on your own? I'll contact the owner first, and the appraisal can be done for you immediately."

"Eh?"

I've never heard of anyone going to a hospital to appraise old books, and most importantly, the shop won't gain any profit out of this. That scary shop owner might even throw a fit.

"No... that's a bit much..."

She did not hear my words at all, having already opened her phone. She quickly typed out a message, and all in an instant she sent it out, closed her phone, and grinned at me large and toothy.

"The mail's sent! Now you can head over there whenever you want."

There was no way I could refuse anymore. I could only nod my head in silence.

Approximately 15 minutes after that, I reached the parking lot of the Ofuna General Hospital.

The white, six-storied building was dazzling under the

midsummer sunshine. This hospital became the largest in the area ten years ago, when they refurbished it; there was a wide courtyard in front of the entrance, but there were no patients coming down the walkways or sitting on the benches. There was only the sound of crickets in the air.

Carrying the paper bag with *Sōseki's Complete Collection*, I passed through the automatic doors and entered the building. The air-conditioned hall was filled with outpatients.

Taking the staircase to the surgical ward, I wondered why I was doing this; I hadn't been here since I retrieved my grandmother's dead body.

My grandmother departed a month after our conversation. Once she got the formal diagnosis, she said that she wanted her final memory to be the Kusatsu Onsen resort. Her condition was still rather stable, so the attending doctor gave his permission to her wish.

Together with me and my mother, she enjoyed the onsen trip energetically and thoroughly. Even her little quibbles with my mother were fun, and to look at her, you'd never know she was ill. However, a week after we returned home to Ofuna, she fainted and died without regaining consciousness. Her life went out like a flame on a candlewick, seemingly planned, and our relatives felt shock before they felt anguish.

I recorded my name on the nurse duty book, and went to the room the girl sent me to. Before I was mentally prepared, I found the room. I let out a soft sigh, gathered myself, and knocked on the door.

“Please excuse me.”

There was no answer. I knocked on the door again, but there was no reply. I peered in through the slightly ajar door.

I was stunned.

It was an elegant and bright room with one bed. The adjustable hospital bed was located by the window. The mattress caved in slightly at the middle, and a long haired woman in cream-colored pajamas lay still with her eyes closed.

She must have fallen asleep while reading, because the open book was resting between her knees. The bridge of her nose was delicate in their place below her eyebrows, and a pair of thick-rimmed spectacles rested on them. Her lips were slightly open, and her gentle, beautiful face resembled a certain someone—the person I saw in Biblia six years ago. Her face was a little slimmer, but the other things hadn't changed much. She was much prettier this way.

There were so many stacks of old books lined up on the bed, it looked like a miniature roadway. She had brought so many books over, more than someone needed to just kill time. The hospital staff didn't tell her off?

She suddenly woke up, rubbed her eyes, and looked over at me.

“...Is that you, Aya?”

She said a name I didn't know. Her voice was soft, but I was taken aback by how clear it was. Now I knew the name of that girl from before.

“Are the books here...?”

She was mistaking me for someone, probably because she was looking at me over the top of her glasses. Staying silent any longer would be bad, so I forced a cough or two to clear my throat.

“...Good afternoon,” I said, clearly enough for her to hear.

Her shoulders leapt in shock, and she moved to adjust her glasses. In doing so she knocked over the book she was reading, and it dropped off the bed.

“Ah.” There was a little cry.

Barely thinking about it, I leapt into the room and caught the book

with one hand, though only just. It wasn't very large dimension-wise, but it was extremely heavy. Its title filled the white cover; it read, *Farewell Photography. August 2nd at the mountaintop hotel*. It was a little aged, and part of the cover was blackened and crumpled.

I was pretty pleased with myself, but when I came up to look, I found her with the blanket up to her chest. Her hand was on the nurse call button on the wall, and her wide eyes betrayed fear. Anyone would be shocked to see an muscular stranger barge into the room. I scrambled to a standing position and put some distance between us.

“Sorry, I’m here to ask about my grandmother’s books. I went to the shop in Kita-Kamakura, and the girl there told me to come here...did you not receive the message?”

Her hand, about to press the call button, stopped abruptly. She looked back to the laptop placed on the side table, narrowed her eyes to look at the screen—and had her face flush red.

“...I’m really sorry.”

I’m really sorry? I looked at her doubtfully. She lowered her head deeply, and her beautiful hair played down in front of me. This was the first time I’ve had someone give me a look like that.

“S-sorry...erm, my little sister caused you...quite some trouble...” Her voice was barely audible, and as she stumbled here and there, her ears got redder.

Her apology continued. “Sorry for—making you—come all the way here...I’m the owner of the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, Shinokawa Shioriko.”

I finally get it. The girl in the shop was her little sister, and she sent a mail to the owner. In other words, the owner changed at some point.

“Someone else owned the shop before, right? A man with some white in his hair.”

“That was my father...”

“Father?”

She nodded. “He died last year...and I took over this shop...”

“I see. My sympathy, then, regarding your loss,” I said, and then I bowed to her. Someone in my family died last year, too. I felt a closeness to her.

“Thank you...”

The room immediately fell into silence. She avoided eye contact and merely looked somewhere around my throat. I didn’t expect her to have such an introverted and shy personality; she was still beautiful, of course, but it just felt somehow lacking. How is someone with this personality supposed to receive customers? It’s not my business, but I can’t help but worry about it.

“Did you help take care of the shop in your father’s place a few years ago?” I asked.

She froze, but I soldiered on.

“I occasionally passed by the shop during my high school days. My school was near there.”

“W-well...yes, I did once in a while...”

Her shoulders relaxed somewhat. It seemed like she’d eased up to me just a little.

“Erm...”

She timidly reached her hand out. Does she want a handshake? I put the paper bag down and wiped my sweaty hand off my jeans. Then, she said gently...

“...The book, if you could...”

I was wrong. Meanwhile, I was still holding *Farewell, Photography*.

“This one must have been expensive,” I said, hoping to defuse the awkwardness. I handed her the book as I spoke.

She tilted her head. I couldn't tell whether she was shaking it or nodding.

"This is the first edition...but it isn't preserved too well...that brings it to about 250,000 yen."

"Two hundred..."

Her calmness surprised me somewhat. This dusty book? I looked at the cover again, my mind blank, but she didn't continue her explanation. She put the 250,000 yen book on the nightstand as if it were any other book and held out her hand again. What is it this time?

"...May I look at the books you're holding?"

I looked over at where she was looking, and realized it was the paper bag holding *Soseki's Complete Collection*. I felt really bad for what I was about to say; it would be so troublesome for her. I licked dry lips.

"Actually, I'm not here to sell them. When I was clearing out my grandmother's old things, I found a signature here... and it seems the series was bought from your shop a long time ago. Can you help me find out how much value this has?"

If she showed even the slightest bit of hesitation, I would have accepted the books back immediately. However, Shinokawa Shioriko continued to stare at me, and she seemed like a different person than before. I saw iron in her eyes.

"Please let me see it," she said, clearly.

"Ah, it's the Iwanami Shoten new edition."

She looked into the bag and her eyes were immediately sparkling; she looked just like a child opening a birthday present. She extracted the volumes from the case, one by one, starting from the first. She flipped through them. The names of the works were

printed on the spine, including titles I was familiar with, like *I am a Cat*¹⁵ and *Botchan*¹⁶.

Her smile grew as she made her way through the set. Occasionally she would nod her head, narrow her eyes, or even clumsily attempt a whistle; the last was something I heard her do once, in the past. Apparently she was unaware of how she looked when she did this; it was probably a habit of hers when she was engrossed in books.

That's the one, I thought. This was the expression etched in my memories, the face she made when she was lost in a book. She continued to read, and I pulled up a chair and sat down quietly.

She suddenly stopped whistling. **Volume Eight: And Then** was placed on her lap. She lowered her head, seemingly troubled, but merely glanced at the signature on the wax paper sleeve. She flipped back through the pages, and suddenly leaned over the label that said "34 volumes, first edition, 3500 yen". She seemed interested in the price for some reason.

Shinokawa placed the book with the signature on her knees and continued to look into the other books. Finally, she flipped again through **Volume Eight: And Then**, slowly.

"I was right," she said softly. She looked up at me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting for so long. I think I've got the gist of it."

"So what's going on?"

"Unfortunately, this signature is a fake," she said.

She was apologetic, but I wasn't particularly surprised. It's what I thought would happen after all.

"So Sōseki didn't write that signature?"

"Yes. The time periods don't add up. Natsume Sōseki died in Taisho Year 5, and this complete collection was released in this 'new edition' in Showa Year 31...which is to say, forty years later."

“Forty years...”

There was no longer any doubt as to its authenticity. You couldn’t die and then forty years later sign a book.

“Then are these books not worth much?”

“Yes...this collection happens to be the economy edition. It was reprinted frequently, and there are many of this collection in old book shops,” she said. “However, the commentary is rich, and the packaging is elaborate. They may be commonplace, but they’re fine books. I like them very much.”

She spoke as if she were praising a dear old friend. Her expression and voice were completely devoid of the timidity she showed before. She looked calmer. This was probably who she really was inside.

“Iwanami Shoten was the first company to publish Sōseki’s *Complete Collection*,” she continued. “The founder, Shigeo Iwanami, had a close relationship with Sōseki, and he often corresponded with Sōseki’s followers. Together, they published the first complete collection, and after several years, they printed revised editions. This cheaper edition isn’t any lower in quality. Sōseki’s diary was first revealed to the public in this edition of the collection, and the commentaries for each book were added by one of these followers, Komiya Toyotaka.”

Her explanation was full of life. The more I listened, the more absorbed I became.

“Then, there are more editions of Sōseki’s *Complete Collection*?”

“Iwanami Shoten isn’t the only one. A whole assortment of publishers have run editions under the same name. If we count runs that didn’t finish printing all the copies they planned to, then there should be at least thirty different editions.”

Hardly even thinking about it, I said, “That’s incredible.”

“Isn’t it? I think he might be the most loved author in all Japan,”

she agreed, nodding.

But I wasn't just praising the great author. I was complimenting Shinokawa, too, for her fluid explanation. I felt both pained and relieved that I couldn't express myself properly; my feelings were complicated.

I glanced at the leftover book. *Volume Eight: And Then.*

"I suppose the signature on this book is just some random doodle, then?"

Usually so quick with a response, she now paused for the first time.

"Well, maybe..."

She looked so uneasy, her eyebrows were practically touching. I couldn't help but wonder what was wrong.

"Is something the matter?"

"I don't suppose it's a big deal, but there's something I don't really understand... maybe this is a personal question, but was your grandmother someone who would ever mark up her books?"

"Eh? No, I guess not," I said, shaking my head. The possibility was hard to imagine. "She really treasured those books...she didn't even let family members touch them. She would have been furious if one of us did, even accidentally."

Touching grandmother's books was a taboo in the family, and me and all our relatives knew this. Even my mother, who was on bad terms with my grandmother, did not dare to do this. Nobody really cared to do it anyway, since no one besides her liked books.

"I think I have a plausible explanation," I said. "Though it would be a different story if her own name was written here..."

Shinokawa took out *Volume Eight: And Then* from its case and opened the cover. From my chair, I leaned forward and looked at the signature again.

The brushstrokes were very light, with fine lines, and looking closely at it, the hand that wrote it seemed female. It was not unique handwriting, and it would be easy to imitate. But this was certainly not grandmother's handwriting.

"Someone sold this collection to Biblia, and my grandmother bought it afterward," I concluded.

She lifted her face away from the book.

"...Is that right?" she said.

"Was it written by the previous owner? Or by the person called 'Yoshio Tanaka'?"

"No, I don't think that's it."

She took out the book's price card and showed it to me. *34 volumes, first edition, 3500 yen.*

"This style of price card was used when my grandfather first opened Biblia. That was forty-five, forty-six years ago."

In other words, Grandmother bought Sōseki's *Complete Collection* around then. If we were to go by the Western Calendar, forty-five, forty-six years ago would be—I could not calculate the numbers all of a sudden.

Oh well.

"This price card doesn't say 'there were words written on it,'" she said, pointing to the card. "If any used bookstore purchases a book, they would first note their condition, as I've always done. Anyone would notice words written in such a conspicuous place, and so we would indicate it on the price card. Otherwise customers might come back and demand compensation."

"...Ah."

I see. Now I totally understood. It was weird not to have a note on the price card indicating that the book was “vandalized”.

“Therefore, when your grandmother bought this collection from my family’s shop, it did not have the fake signature on it.”

I folded my arms. This situation seemed to get weirder and weirder. If we were correct, the person who forged this signature could not even exist. How could that be possible?

“Ah...” I suddenly thought of something. “...Maybe Grandfather wrote it.”

“Your grandfather?”

“He died several decades ago, and I never met him. I think he accidentally touched grandmother’s bookcase once, and they got into an argument...”

According to Mom, Grandfather was nearly chased out of the house. If he not only touched the book, but left some words on it—it would make sense why I was beaten when I touched it. Perhaps she recalled that painful memory. *If you make the same mistake again, you’re no longer a child from our house.* She probably remembered Grandfather’s vandalism when she said those words.

“I really can’t think of who else who would write it. Nobody dared to touch that bookshelf,” I said.

But Shinokawa shook her head slightly.

“I don’t think so.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t think it was done by anyone else in your family...I think your grandmother wrote it,” she concluded.

“Why?” How could she be so sure?

“If it were someone else who scribbled on it, your grandmother wouldn’t have just left it at that. But book doesn’t have any signs of an attempt to erase the words...and if it was difficult to erase, it

would be easy to buy another *Volume Eight* to replace it. As I said, this book isn't expensive. There have been a lot of reprints, and when they do reprint, the new bookstores stock them for a long time."

"But...maybe she didn't leave it alone. Maybe it's just that someone wrote on it, but she didn't realize..."

Halfway through my justification, my tongue stopped moving. That would be the least likely thing. The Guanyin Bodhisattva of the Goura family would never be that careless. If someone really touched the books in that room, she would definitely find out.

Did Grandmother really write that?

If that were the case, it couldn't be a simple doodle. Grandmother must have done it for a reason. I frowned over this as I folded my elbows.

"There's something else I'm concerned about," said Shinokawa. "It's about the price card..."

I didn't know what to say. I lifted my head, but Shinokawa was looking at her knees, seemingly in shock. Her long and beautiful black hair covered her face.

"Ah... I'm very sorry..." she muttered softly.

She was back to the way she was before she saw *Sōseki's Complete Collection*. I had no idea what she was apologizing for.

"Huh? What is it?"

"I'm, ah... so sorry to trouble you..."

"Eh? Sorry, but can you please repeat that again?"

She was speaking too softly and I craned my neck to hear, but Shinokawa was retreating almost right up to the window. What did I do wrong? Her white throat throbbed, and she spoke in a peculiar voice.

"I... I only wanted to see if the signature was authentic... but, I ended up saying too much..."

This just confused me more.

“People used to say that I... that I just couldn’t stop talking when it came to books.”

I noticed my profile reflected off the window. A brooding, muscular man sitting on a round chair, his eyebrows angled down, his narrow and long eyes glaring, all enveloped in an aura of murderous intent. I had inadvertently invoked the stare of my grandmother, which came out whenever I was deep in thought.

“I—I’m really sorry for taking so much of your time, so...”

She went to put **Volume Eight: And Then** back in the bag. Before she could finish her sentence, I cut her off.

“I don’t mind what you’re doing at all!”

I instantly realized I was too loud. She trembled in fright as the paper bag and book fell from her hands. She flailed her arms, flustered, but she managed to catch them before they dropped onto the floor. She heaved a sigh of relief, but then, realizing that I was staring at her, she covered her face with the bag, embarrassed.

“...Please, go on with what you were saying,” I said in a softer voice.

She looked at me worriedly from behind the bag. She was practically a different person from earlier, when she had made her explanation so eloquently.

I spoke again. “When I was young... something bad happened to me about books, and I couldn’t ever read them afterwards. But I’ve always wanted to read books, so you just telling me about them makes me very happy.”

I said this without meaning to. Up until this point, nobody understood this “condition” of mine. She widened her eyes at me, probably not understanding either. I was just about to give up, but then she moved the bag off her face, and her wide black eyes showed signs of life. It seemed like a switch was pressed, the change

in her was so immediate.

“You can’t read books because you were scolded by your grandmother?”

Her voice was clear and definitive. This time, I was the shocked one.

“How did you know?”

“I believe your grandmother was the kind of person who would be furious if anyone accidentally touched her bookshelf. Then if ‘nobody dared to touch it’, it means no one besides her... and if she would become that angry, I suppose it isn’t surprising that now you can’t read books...”

I was at a loss for words. She hit the bullseye so easily. As long as it was related to books, she knew everything.

I put my hands on my knees and sat down again. I wanted her to continue.

“I dearly love old books,” she said. “I feel that these books, handed down, will carry stories in them... and not only the stories on their pages.”

She paused and looked at me right in the eyes, as if acknowledging my existence for the first time.

“May I know your name?”

“Goura Daisuke.”

“Mr. Goura, actually, there is something else I’m concerned about.”

I was startled to hear her use my name. It felt as if we’d become a little closer.

She again handed me the price card with the words *34 volumes, first edition, 3500 yen.*

“There is a stamp of ownership on this price card.”

“Eh...? Ah, yes.”

“Look.”

She took out a book from Sōseki’s *Complete Collection* on her bedsheet and removed the cover. It was **Volume Twelve: Kokoro**. She opened the cover. There was no signature on the inner lining paper; instead, there was a hydrangea-styled stamp on it.

“This is a *stamp of ownership*, a mark the owner puts on his or her collection of books. It used to be more popular in China and Japan, and there were all sorts of different stamps, varying according to the owner’s taste. They’re like any other stamps; having them be words was more common, but there were also patterned stamps like this. The person who used this stamp might have liked hydrangeas.”

“Wow...”

I didn’t know this at all, and I felt somewhat impressed. Then something occurred to me.

“Then, that means this book should have a stamp too?”

I asked as I looked at **Volume Eight: And Then** on her knees. If there had been such a stamp, it would have been obvious.

“No, and that’s what is so strange here. **And Then** is the only book that doesn’t have an ownership stamp on it, even though the other volumes had them.”

“...I suppose it is strange.”

“Very strange.”

I lowered my head and sighed. Amongst the 34 volumes, there were books with stamps, and no signature, and then there was one book with a signature, but no stamp. I was more and more confounded.

“How did your grandmother come to purchase the collection at my family’s bookstore? Did you never ask?”

“No... I only knew she bought lots of books before she got married... maybe my mom and my aunts weren’t too clear about this. Nobody was really concerned about these old books anyway.”

“...Is that so?” She laid a fist on her hip. “In that case, the only thing I can think of is that **Volume Eight** was...”

Shinokawa suddenly stopped talking, and I hurriedly cast my eyes to the glass window. No one was glaring at her this time. It certainly was not because of my stare.

I prompted her to continue, anxious. “What about **Volume Eight**? ”

She seemed to be very hesitant. After a while, she suddenly put her finger on her lips.

“Can we just keep this between us?”

“Huh?”

“I think we’ll be infringing on your grandmother’s privacy.”

I hesitated slightly, then nodded. “...Alright.”

Had my grandmother been alive, it would be different, but she was a year in her grave. As her grandson, I’d be forgiven if I listened in on her private matters. I really wanted to know more.

“Actually, all the answers were there once you brought this book to me, Mr. Goura.”

“What do you mean?”

“Without this signature or the price card, nobody would know this book was bought from an antique bookstore. *So your grandmother probably wanted your family to believe it had been, Mr. Goura.*”

“Eh?”

I widened my eyes. I had no idea what she meant at all.

“Wait, so my grandmother bought this book from the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, and then she made the signature afterward, right?”

“That was what had thought until just now, but there seems to be something more complicated going on.”

She flipped open **Volume Eight: And Then**, and touched the signature on the inner cover paper.

“This signature is styled like a dedicatory signature. Normally, in such situations...”

She stopped speaking when she realized I was lost.

“In a dedication, you write a note to someone else as a token of appreciation or admiration. Then it’s signed with the author’s own name and the other name, of the person the book is dedicated to.”

Dedicatory signature. I see. I learned something new again, and nodded for her to continue.

“There isn’t any fixed way to write a dedicatory signature, but normally, the other party’s signature is written in the middle, while the sender is written on the same side... and this sender would be the author. But this book has it completely reversed.”

This is the same as writing an address. It was true that *Natsume Sōseki* was written in the middle, while *To Mr. Tanaka Yoshio* was written on the left side.

“Maybe it’s simply because Grandmother wasn’t clear on the usual way?”

“Maybe... but there’s something still more curious. Mr. Goura, why would your grandmother write the sender’s name as a dedicatory signature? If she wanted to pass this book off as an famously autographed copy, she would simply need to write Sōseki’s name. There’s no need for another name on it.”

I had been wondering about who this Yoshio Tanaka was since the first moment I saw this book—who was that person?

“...I think it’s the other way around,” said Shinokawa.

Her tone was flat, but her black eyes betrayed a glint of

excitement. I was again attracted by her words, and brought my chair closer to the bed.

“...Other way around?”

“The script is a little uneven for someone who purportedly wrote this in one sitting. What if this book was originally signed by Tanaka Yoshio, rather than Natsume Sōseki? And then afterwards, your grandmother added Sōseki’s name... it’s natural if you think about it this way.”

“Eh, but... this man Tanaka isn’t an author, so why did he put a signature on it?”

“I don’t think he intended to impersonate the author,” she said. She was blushing. “Couldn’t it be a gift? It’s not rare for a sender to write his own name.”

“Ah...”

In other words, this Yoshio Tanaka gave this book to Grandmother.

I suddenly recalled the words my grandmother said when she was alive—that those who liked books would prefer like-minded people. *Grandfather did not like reading*, and it’s not a surprise that grandmother would get along with “like-minded” men.

I surfaced from deep thoughts. If this was true, then it did not make sense.

“But Grandmother bought the collection at Biblia. She didn’t get it from Tanaka,” I said.

“That’s true. It’s likely that Mr. Tanaka only gave her this volume. Perhaps your grandmother came to buy the whole set of 34 volumes only after receiving *Volume Eight: And Then*, which carried the signature. Then she probably got rid of the duplicate copy. This book didn’t have a stamp, and there was no indication of a signature on the price card; with this logic, everything fits.”

“But why go to all the trouble?”

“So that *Volume Eight* wouldn’t be seen by your family... if it was hidden inside the full set, nobody would think it was a present. It would be too obvious if only one volume from Sōseki’s *Complete Collection* were on the bookshelf. That’s why she bought the full set of 34 volumes from us... deliberately leaving the bookmark in *Volume Eight*, as ‘proof’ that she bought it at the Antiquarian Bookshop.”

“Then what about the signature?”

“The addition of Sōseki’s was, I think, added as a failsafe. Rather than actually convince anyone it was authentic, she possibly *wanted* to make everyone think it was some useless doodle from the original owner.”

I thought back to I first saw the signature. I did suspect that it was fake, but even then I never thought of it as more than some doodle. Grandmother really fooled me.

“...Was there a need to go this far?” I murmured. What was it, the secret that my grandmother, who was never scared of anything, had to hide so thoroughly?

“Considering how things were in the past... I feel there is a reason,” she said cautiously.

I could guess at what that “reason” was. My great-grandparents were still in good health when my grandmother got married. It was a different time. Secret rendezvous with lovers, hidden from your parents, must have been more common than it was today. And in the end, she married my grandfather through an arranged marriage —something Yoshio Tanaka could do nothing about.

I recalled the words my grandmother said to me, in this very hospital. She suddenly brought up the subject of marriage after apologizing for hitting me in my childhood. Perhaps talking about *And Then* linked back to her own marriage? Then maybe there was another meaning in the words, “once I die, I’ll leave all my books to you two to handle as you please”. She probably felt it wouldn’t

matter if we saw that signature.

Surely, in my grandmother's mind, it linked back.

"But why put it on the bookshelf? She could have hidden them somewhere else."

This was the only thing I could not understand. If she had tucked it deep in her drawer or something, there would be no need for such little tricks.

"Maybe she felt that it was safer to put it together with the other books instead of hiding it alone somewhere. And..."

Shinokawa stroked the cover of **Volume Eight: And Then**, treasuring it. For some reason, I recalled the hand of my grandmother that beat me up.

"...She wanted to put her most treasured book somewhere she could reach for directly. Maybe it's that kind of feeling."

She lowered her head, looked beyond the book on the knees, and stared far away. In that case, that person was also someone who 'loved books'. Lovers would naturally want to find those of the same kind. I got serious the moment I inadvertently thought about asking.

"...I don't really know how much of what we said up till this point is true."

She suddenly lifted her head and said,

"It was something that happened a long time before we're born, and we can't confirm it with your grandmother...these are the only things that we can gather from what we learnt from this book."

The sides of her lips showed a smile, and I felt as if I just awoke from a dream. It is true that we do not know what parts are true, and what are not, given that grandmother has died.

Shinokawa suddenly looked down at her watch. She seemed to be checking the time, and maybe, she had some examination after this.

"What do you want to do with this complete collection? I can buy

it if you want..."

"No, I want to bring it break. Thank you very much."

I stood up. Even if it was not something very valuable, this complete collection was filled with grandmother's past. I did not want to hand it over to anyone else so nonchalantly.

"...What you said was interesting, very interesting."

I met Shinokawa in the eyes as she rested on the bed. It would be too awkward to go back like this. While I was wondering how to say that I wanted to hear her continuation of this explanation, she handed over the paper bag with *Sōseki's Complete Collection* inside.

"...Thank you."

While I received the bag, her lips moved.

"...Mr Goura Daisuke."

"Yes?"

I was a little troubled to be called by my full name.

"By any chance, did your grandmother give you this name?"

"Eh? ...That's right, but how did you know?"

Only my relatives knew about this, and nobody would want to know how my name came about.

After answering her, her expression became gloomy.

"...When did your grandmother get married?"

Now what is the matter? Is the story still not complete? Troubled, I started to search through my memory. I was not really clear, but I think someone mentioned it recently. Anyway, I suddenly looked into the paper bag.

"Ah, that's right. I heard that this book came out the year before her marriage."

I opened the bag and pointed at *Volume Eight: And Then* at the top.

At that moment, her expression froze. Perhaps it was my imagination.

“I’m really sorry for making you hear so many weird things.”

She lowered her head honestly on the bed.

I returned home to report my findings, and my mother’s expression changed.

Of course, I did not mention anything about grandmother’s past. I simply told her that the signature was forged, but she was angry about something else.

“When did I say that you’re to take it to the bookstore? And you ran to the hospital just to get it validated. Do you know how much trouble that is!? That’s even worse than doing a dine-and dash!!”

As expected of the daughter of a diner family, she even said that it was a dine-and-dash. It was a sore point for me since I am the grandchild of the diner family. I decided to obey my mother’s instructions obediently and bring a meal the next day. This was the case, and it was a fact that I caused Shinokawa trouble, but I had an excuse to see her again.

The next day was a weekday.

Like the day before, I woke up at noon. Mom had already went out for work. I went downstairs to look at the mail, and found that the hiring company sent a notice. I opened it, and found my my resume and a ruthless rejection saying that I was not hired. Dejected, I sighed, dumped it into the trash bin, pulled the shutter of the eatery, and went out.

It was still a hot sunny day that burned my forehead. The damp hot winds blew from the sea, and the smell of the sea was vaguely mixed it. This was the summer of Kamakura I was familiar with ever since young, and was not comfortable at all.

I filled my stomach at the McDonalds in front of the station, and walked several rounds looking for some ‘delicious food’ at the station building. However, I had a tough time deciding. I did not know her favorites, and I could not focus on shopping. I was still wondering about the conversation before I left.

Did grandmother give me my name? When did she marry? These two questions did not seem to be too signification, but she was definitely shaken by my answer.

The previous day, I asked my mother regarding my name ‘Daisuke’.

“That person forcefully named this when you were born.”

She went on a tirade as she said this. It seemed she was still furious over what happened 20 years ago, but it certainly was a little weird to call grandmother *that woman* so casually.

“She said it was a name she thought of a long time ago. I vehemently disagreed...’Daisuke’ sounds like the name of someone from the bōsōzoku^[7].”

I was not some former bōsōzoku member, and I really could not agree with her regarding that. How would I know what sort of names were common amongst the bōsōzoku?

“Apparently, the name came from the book she loved the most. Different kanji, but same pronunciation. Heck if I remember what book it was.”

But I knew. When I reached home yesterday, I flipped open **Volume Eight: And Then**, and discovered that the male protagonist was called Daisuke^[8]. My name was definitely taken from here, and Shinokawa must have noticed it.

I did feel my body freeze up when I opened the book, and sweat rolled down profusely, but I managed to hang on and read a part of the prologue. What I read was introductory chit-chat with a dormitory student working part-time. In there I found that Daisuke

was unemployed, and I suddenly had a sense of kinship with him. He was not an extremely motivated person and I wondered, what happened to this Daisuke in the end? Without this “condition” of mine, I could have read on until the end.

But I was puzzled as to why grandmother gave me this name. She couldn't have possibly hoped that I become a person who didn't do anything.

I thought as I went down the shopping street, and finally stopped at a Western-styled sweets shop. This shop's specialty was the sandwich biscuits with raisins and butter cream. It might be good to bring these biscuits as a snack, and I would be struck with heatstroke if I were to continue on like this.

Just when I was about to step into the shop, I spotted a familiar petite woman. Her skin was slightly tan, and she was a little plump. She had large eyes, and I would think of a little bear cub when I saw her face. She was older than my mother, and seemed to have finish her purchase of pastries as she was holding a plastic bag with a pastry box in it.

“Oh my, isn't this Daisuke? You're here to buy sweets from this shop too?”

It was aunt Maiko who was staying at Fujisawa.

Aunt Maiko is the eldest daughter of the Goura family, and she can be said to be the most successful amongst my relatives.

Ever since young, her grades were outstanding, and once she graduated from a certain Mission school in Yokohama¹⁹, she immediately married a man from an electric works company, and gave birth to 2 girls without issues. They built a large house at Kugenuma in Fujisawa City, located near Ofuna, and the four of them lived comfortable lives. She was someone who was passionate about taking care of others, but she would tense up when speaking.

She resembled neither grandmother nor my mother, but rather

was a chip from my grandfather's block.

"My Mina resigned last year, spent some time travelling and going around shopping and touring around with friends. She just found a job a few days ago, near the Kawasaki Center. Such a young girl working at Kawasaki; we kept telling her to resign, but she just wouldn't listen."

I was brought a certain national chain cafe in the station building, and I was the only male customer in the shop full of elderly women. It really felt weird.

"...Kawasaki doesn't seem so dangerous."

We were talking about my cousin, a year after my grandmother's death.

"But Kawasaki had always been a place for men to play around. There was a lot of overtime work, and I'm worried."

She seemed to have concluded that Kawasaki was a street for merrymakers. That might be the case in the past, but now, there are ordinary shopping districts around the station. Just when I wanted to say this, my aunt changed the topic.

"Speaking of which, how's Eri doing? Is she still busy with her work?"

Eri is my mom's name. She had been working overtime often recently, and had been really busy.

"...More or less."

"Then what about you? Have you found a job?"

"...Not yet."

"What kind of job do you want? Have you taken part in employment drives?"

Unknowingly, it became a lecture to me. I started to understand vaguely once I grew into an adult. Whenever this aunt start talking about her family affairs, it would be a sign that she wanted to hear

out who she was talking to. I stumbled as I answered, saying that I went to interview at several companies, and was headed to the Hello Work Agency |10|.

“In this economic downtime, it will be hard for you to choose a job suitable for you. You do have an advantage in physical strength. How about you try out for the JSDF |11| or the police?”

She was polite in her words, but she had the same intent as my mom. I inadvertently wondered whether it was because they were sisters that they thought the same thing.

“My husband’s worried about you too. If you can’t get a job no matter what you do, come talk with us.”

I was a little touched. My uncle-in-law is the second son of the Kugenuma magnate family, and had vast connections in Fujisawa. He retired last year, but I heard he was chosen as a candidate for the City Council. Maybe he could recommend me a job.

“Ah, yes.”

“If you continue to idle like this, your grandma will worry about you in the other world. She does treat you like the apple in her eye.”

I nearly spat out the ice coffee I was drinking.

“No. That can’t possibly be true.”

Those narrow eyes were too thin to allow anything in. She was not someone who could easily forgive and love a kid after the kid made a mistake.

“You’re just like Eri here, huh? Both of you certainly never realized it.”

Aunt sighed worriedly.

“I’ve seen her longer than anyone else, so I understand this. Your grandma loves you and Eri most...whenever she made to occasional trip to our house, she kept talking about you two all the time. She went for her final trip with you two, right? My husband and I were

the ones who proposed to go out with her first, but she refused.”

This was the first time I heard this. It was true that my retired uncle and housewife aunt Maiko had much more free time as compared to my mom who had been busy with work, and me, who had been busy looking for a job.

Now that she said so, I never remembered seeing my grandmother quarrel with aunt Maiko before. I thought that they were able to get along unlike my mom, but it could be said that their relationship was not as close.

“Then, why are we...”

In terms of appearance, there was no way my mother and I were pleasing to the eyes. I never thought of anything that would make grandmother happy.”

“...Is it because you’re tall?”

“Huh?”

I could not help but ask, but aunt’s expression was serious.

“I’m not joking here. Your grandfather was the same too; our family members’ build are typically short except for you and Eri. I feel she prefers taller people...you see, your grandmother’s room had such a thing, right?”

Aunt drew a rectangle with her finger, and after thinking about it for a while, I understood what she was referring to. It was the rubber board on the door frame.

“That was nailed on when we were young. No one in our household grew that tall, and yet she said something like ‘*it’ll be bad if the next child grows up and ends up hitting into it*’...that’s what she said before Eri was born. It had been 45, 46 years.”

I was momentarily stunned. All sorts of numbers in my mind, and I inadvertently recalled what my grandmother said– ‘*if you make the same mistake again, you’re no longer a child from our house*’.

Is that so? I muttered deep in my heart, and gulped down my ice coffee to hide my anxiousness. My mouth felt dry inside, but my hands were soaked.

“...You hit into it, Daisuke? That thing?”

I nodded silently.

“So it does have its purpose after all. Your grandmother must have been really happy.”

My aunt’s voice felt distant, and I finally understood why Shinokawa was so shocked–no, I still had not confirmed if it was true. I lifted my head.

“Speaking of which, about what I heard earlier.”

I tried my best to remain calm. This was a spur of the moment question, not something that had been stewing awhile.

“What kind of person was grandfather?”

The hand reaching for the glass mug stopped, and my aunt went silent. I could suddenly hear the voices of the surrounding customers very clearly. There were two women of similar age as my aunt seated at the table next to us, chatting away loudly. They seemed to be discussing if the most effective health food was black vinegar.

“Did your grandmother ever mentioned about your grandfather?”

Now that she asked this, I realized I never heard her talk about grandfather.

“...No.”

“Then you never heard of how he died.”

“I did hear my mom mention it a little...she said that he died in a car accident while coming back from the Kawasaki Daishi in midsummer.”

Suddenly, aunt Maiko snorted and gave a bitter smile. This cold

expression on her face really shocked me, as it was not an expression she would normally do.

“Eri was really young back then, and she really believe that.”

She murmured to herself.

“Why, with so many temples in Kamakura, did he choose to go pray at Kawasaki? And in the middle of summer too?...That Kawasaki Daishi was just an excuse your grandfather made.”

“...Excuse?”

“Horse racing and car racing. Aren’t these the things that come to your mind when we talk about Kawasaki? Your father’s an alcoholic too, and he was dead drunk on the day he got into that accident.”

I was shocked speechless. I never thought that my grandfather was that kind of person.

“Your grandfather was a son-in-law adopted into the family, and I heard that he worked really hard when the marriage started. But after I was born, once your great grandparents died, he started to act weird. He would go to the ‘Kawasaki Daishi’ for several days and never come back.”

I finally understood why aunt hated Kawasaki. There was no way she could feel at ease about going to a place her father often went for gambling. She probably did not want to approach that place too.

“It was really amazing that your grandmother did not ask for a divorce...and she kept enduring no matter what happened. Of course, it was a different case when he touched the bookshelf; she was really scary that time.”

I held back the words I wanted to say. I still could not remain calm.

“Daisuke, you mustn’t act like your grandfather. You have to work hard.”

She reverted back to her lecturing tone, and probably told me

something even my mom did not know of to warn me. That line was like a message. She moved her chair, and was about to stand up; it seemed she was about to head home.

“...Aunty, have you read Sōseki’s *And Then*? ”

Aunt looked at me with surprise as she carried the plastic bag with the Western sweets shop logo on it, and kept blinking her eyes.

“Why ask this out of a sudden? ”

“Apparently, it was a book grandmother really treasured. I started reading it recently,” I said, privately gauging grandmother’s response. She looked doubtful; it looked like she was clueless about any secrets hidden in that book. If the eldest daughter Maiko did not know, it seemed that I was the only one in the family who did.

“I never read the book, but I saw the movie, the one with Yūsaku Matsuda casted as the lead.”

This was the first time I heard it was made into a movie.

“What was the end? I only knew that the male lead doesn’t have a job.”

“Hm, well...”

Aunt lowered her head to recall. It seemed she did not remember too well.

“I think the male lead got another man’s wife.”

The sun was setting by the time I reached the hospital.

Like the previous day, Shinokawa was reading on the bed. She seemed to be trying to whistle, her lips protruding slightly. The moment she saw me, however, she nodded with her face bright red.

“He...hello...”

She greeted me softly, and her attitude was completely different from when she was explaining about ‘Sōseki’s *Complete Collection*’

yesterday. It seemed that she would revert back to her introverted nature if she was not talking about books.

“Hello. Do you have time now?”

“Ah, yes...please come in...”

She fidgeted and let me sit down. When I went into the room, I found a book lying on her knees. She was reading a novel, and I wondered what book it was, she shyly showed me the cover. It was *Julia and the Bazooka* by Anna Kavan. It is really a strange name; I could not imagine what the content was about |12|.

I again apologized for what happened the previous day, and handed her the sandwich biscuits. She shook her head hurriedly.

“No...you-don’t have to mind...I’m the one at fault for saying so much useless stuff...”

The term ‘useless stuff’ seemed to have some hidden power in it. She refused to take it, and I brought the box to Shinokawa’s hands in a half-forceful manner. She then lowered her head awkwardly.

While I was wondering if I was a little too forceful, she spoke softly,

“I was just thinking of having a snack, you see,” she said with a soft voice. “If—if possible...can we eat it together?”

Of course, I did not refuse. She opened the box and handed me a biscuit with a separate packaging. We opened our bags at the same time.

It was nicer than I thought. The fragrance of butter and the sourness of raisins were a perfect match, and the crispness of the biscuit was a nice feeling on the teeth.

“I do occasionally buy this to eat...but I can’t taste the flavor if I leave it to the next day.”

Shinokawa smiled as she said. I was not too sure, but it seemed I made the right choice.

I finished the biscuit in two mouthfuls, and she kept on nibbling. She invited me to eat, but she was not talking at all. Of course, we never talked about the *Sōseki Complete Collection*.

She knew the secret my grandmother kept for decades from what I said and from the clues on the book. She also tried her best not to let me discover this secret, and that was why she called it ‘useless stuff’.

Of course, it was already too late.

The previously mentioned *Volume Eight: And Then* was published on July 27 in the 31st year of the Showa Era. That would be 1956—54 years ago. My grandmother was married the following year, and I thought that Yoshio Tanaka was the one who gave her the book.

Thinking about it now, it didn’t necessarily have to be that Yoshio Tanaka sent her the book immediately after it was published. He could plausibly have given his most treasured book to my grandmother later.

My grandmother bought the rest of the series 45 or 46 years ago... about ten years after she got married. If Toshio Tanaka gave her this book during that time period, *then it would have been while she was still married to my grandfather*. Soseki’s *And Then* was a story about how Daisuke stole another man’s wife. My grandparents’ marriage hadn’t been at all happy.

My grandmother gave me the name ‘Daisuke’ based on the male protagonist, and it was something she thought of a long time ago—in other words, she did not name this simply because of me, but because there was a possibility my mom would be a boy when she was about to be born. Grandmother bought the *Sōseki’s Complete Collection* from around the time my mom was born.

Aunt Maiko said that grandmother liked tall people, which was why she preferred mom and me. But this was probably half the truth. We were the only tall ones in the family, and the rest were short. I did not look like grandfather at all.

Did grandmother see the face of her secret lover through mom and me?

She nailed a rubber board on the Japanese-styled room on the second floor. This was something short people would not think about—that someone must have knocked his head into it.

Perhaps she had more reasons to nail it on than just her children after they'd grown up. If she hadn't wanted someone to hurt their head, it could also be a certain someone my family did not know of, someone as tall as me.

My real grandfather was the man called Yoshio Tanaka—perhaps this was the secret my grandmother hid at all costs. *You won't be a child of our house any longer*, had she meant that statement literally?

But these were only guesses. Since grandmother died, I could not confirm them, but they were possible.

“...Is Yoshio Tanaka still alive?”

Upon hearing my question, Shinokawa, who was about to take her last bite, stopped.

“Maybe he's still alive...and maybe...”

She lowered her head. I knew what she was saying. Yoshio Tanaka could meet my grandmother when she was busy with the eatery; that meant that he could be staying nearby.

The patient room was in silence under the sunset. This fact we could not say out was something only the two of us were clear about. We did not know anything about each other, but for some reason, we were related by this common secret.

“Well...Mr Goura?”

Shinokawa's voice suddenly rang in my ears clearly.

“What kind of job are you doing now?”

I was suddenly pulled back into reality. Since she asked me so

directly, I had to answer honestly.

“...I haven’t found one.”

“Part-time jobs?”

“...I’m not doing any at the moment.”

I did not know when I would be called in for interviews, so it was hard for me to do part-time work for long hours. I felt more awkward when I said this—but for some reason, her face showed delight. What was going on? Was she happy that I did not have work?

“I...got a fracture, and there’s still some time before I get discharged...the shop’s already lacking in staff, and it ended up like this.”

“...Oh.”

She added on vaguely, and I really did not know what she meant at all.

“Then, if you don’t mind, can you please come to my shop to work?”

I widened my eyes at her, and she lowered her head deeply.

“Please. My little sister will help, but she’s not very reliable.”

“Wa...wait a second. I don’t understand books at all.”

And I should have mentioned about my ‘nature’. It was unheard of for someone bad at reading books to work at a bookstore.

“...Do you have a license?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. There are no problems then.”

She nodded her head vigorously.

“...Is it more important to have someone who knows how to drive instead of being able to read?”

“Working at an old bookstore, what you need to know isn’t what’s in the books, but rather their market prices. Of course it’s helpful to have read lots of books, but you can pick stuff up even if you haven’t read any. In fact, many people working at bookstores don’t read outside of work. Maybe someone like me who reads everything is weird...”

My jaw dropped. My impression of an old book store had completely collapsed, and I was feeling that I heard something I shouldn’t have.

“Anyway, we need to move large numbers of books, so you need a driver’s license. I’ve been doing the acquisition and valuations of the books, so if you can follow my instructions, Mr. Goura...”

Somehow things ended up like this. I managed to recover.

“Bu-but...isn’t there anyone more suitable?”

“Did you not say that you’re happy when you hear anything regarding books?”

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

“I do become very talkative when I start mention about books...the children working part-time before this all resigned because they could not stand me. I really couldn’t find anyone who could work with me.”

So she wanted to hire me so I could listen to her talk? At my stupefied expression, she lifted her eyes, evidently pleading for assistance. My head felt hot to see her teary eyes. That look on her face was a crime.

“Anyway, our family bookstore requires lots of physical labor, and there are a lot of things to memorize. Our little shop also pays pretty well, too...”

I involuntarily felt that I couldn’t just leave her alone like this, but I still did not answer. She leaned over, surrounded by a hill of books, and nearly fell off the bed.

“...You don’t want to do it?”

I suddenly recalled the words my grandmother said to me in this hospital.

If you could read, your life would be so different

The person before me was a bookworm who had always been reading. I was not altogether unsatisfied with myself at that moment, but deep within my heart I knew I wanted to live in this pile of books.

And also—I was thinking about Yoshio Tanaka. Most likely, he was a ‘bookworm’ just like grandmother and Shinokawa. If he stayed nearby, perhaps he might appear at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.

“I understand.”

Mentally prepared, I stood up and nodded.

“But I have a condition.”

She immediately tensed up.

“...What is it?”

“Can you tell me about the story of Natsume Sōseki’s ***And Then?*** What kind of story is it? I want to know as much as I can.”

The books passed down through different hands do not simply have contents, but also their own stories.

I learned the story of how my grandmother cherished this ***Volume Eight: And Then.*** I was very interested in the story on its pages, too—however, I was unable to read it to the end.

“Of course,” she said, nodding firmly with a smile. Her beaming face kept me from looking away. She seemed to be lost in reminiscence as she looked up into the sky. After a while, her delicate lips spoke with a gentle voice.

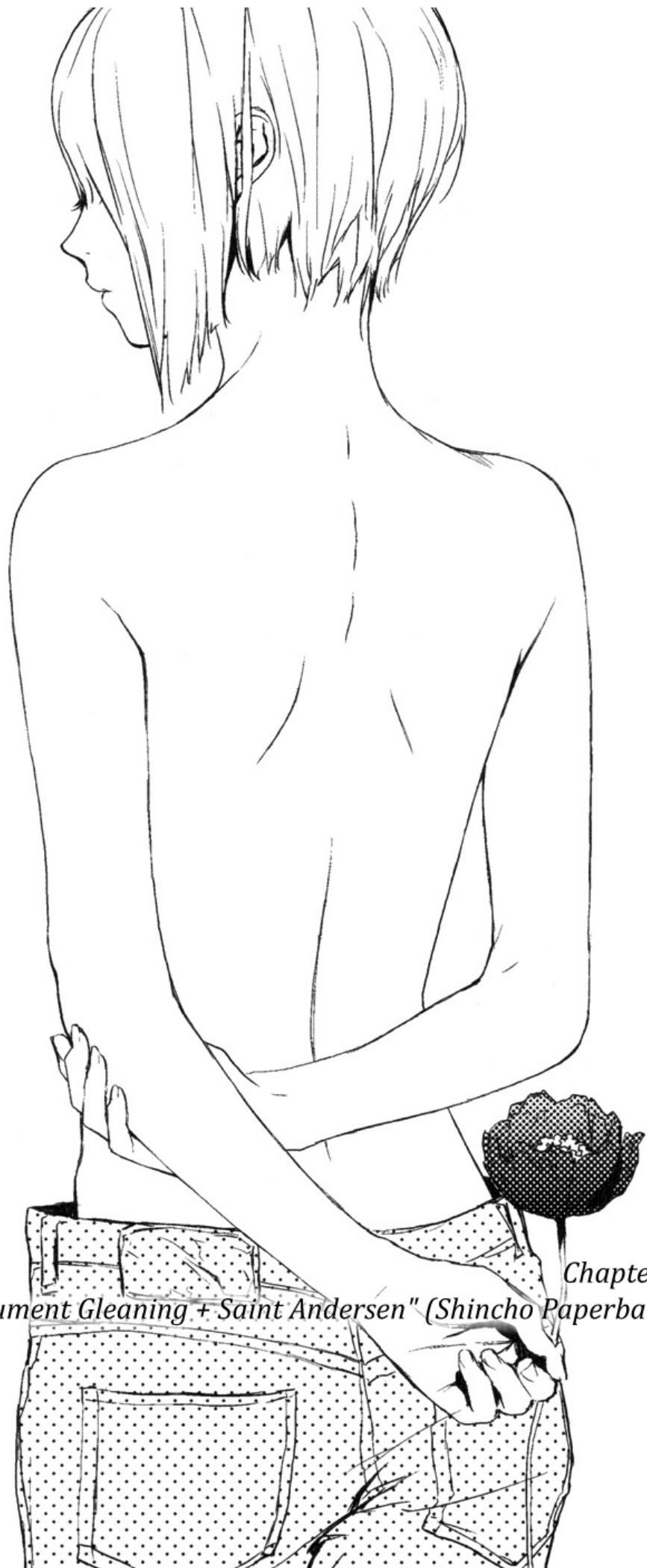
“***And Then*** was serially published in the Asahi Shinbun in the year

Meiji 42. It was part of a trilogy that also includes *Sanshiro* and *The Gate...*"

Is she going to start from the background? It seemed we were in for a long conversation. I listened to each word silently as I gently pulled the round chair towards the bed.

CHAPTER 2

KIYOSHI KOYAMA, MONUMENT GLEANING +
SAINT ANDERSEN (SHINCHO PAPERBACK)



Chapter 2
Kiyoshi Koyama "Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen" (Shincho Paperback)

Before I knew it, the hour hand of the clock was pointing at eleven. It was time to open the shop.

I had been leisurely dusting away the at top of the bookshelves, but now I pushed the wagon filled with books, worth about 100 yen each, to the front of the shop, and flipped the signboard around.

But for all my effort, there wasn't a single customer waiting. I didn't see a soul on the narrow street near the station platform. It was overwhelmingly hot; no one would want to go out in this weather. Massive, puffy cumulonimbus clouds were gathered in the sky above the station's roof. I guessed there would be a thunderstorm in the afternoon.

The breeze blowing by was humid, blistering, and as musty-smelling as anyone's breath. The signboard, showing the word "Biblia", spun around, and the words "Antiquarian Bookshop" came into view from the reverse side.

Nevertheless, a new day was beginning.

I stretched my back and turned back into the so-called "shop"; it was more like a cave made out of books. The dim interior was slightly humid, but it was much cooler than outside.

This was the third day that I, Daisuke Goura, had spent working in the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. I hadn't known this before becoming an employee, but the shop was actually rather famous locally, since it dealt with very expensive books. After a search on the internet, I found out that the shop actually leased books out for exhibitions on occasion.

A few days ago. I had an encounter with the shop owner Shioriko Shinokawa, when I brought her *Sōseki's Complete Collection*—a set of books owned by my grandmother. Even though my "condition" prevents me from reading books, meeting her led me to start working here.

Shinokawa felt that old books had their own tales in addition to

the contents on the pages. She perfectly unraveled my grandmother's "tale" hidden in *Sōseki's Complete Collection*, and this "tale" revealed a secret about my own birth. Shinokawa had an exceptional amount of knowledge about old books and displayed astounding insight. But, she was extremely introverted; she wouldn't dare look anyone in the eye, unless they were talking about books.

And so three days passed.

Shinokawa's little sister was named Shinokawa Ayaka, and she minded the shop before I started. That girl never taught me anything except how to use the cash register and where to put the cleaning equipment. In fact, Ayaka didn't even seem to be certain what a job at an antique bookstore entailed; she just watched my actions skeptically. Though certainly, it is unbelievable that I, who came in as a customer, could be an apprentice shop attendant by the next morning.

"You do know that my sister is ignorant of anything that isn't a book, right?"

She repeated the same line so many times, it kind of got on my nerves.

"And do you know that a thief came in here a few days ago? Nothing was stolen, but it does feel a little unsafe around here now."

The way she prattled about it seemed to imply that I was that thief. I really wanted to remind her that she was the one who made me find Shinokawa at the hospital, but kept it in and continued my work silently. I grew up in a restaurant, after all. I could do some basic customer service if I put my mind to it.

Ayaka hadn't come out of the main house yet this morning. Perhaps she had decided to ease up on me a bit. Or maybe she had just gotten tired of looking after me all the time.

Whatever the reason, it had left the shop eerily quiet. Feeling the silence all around me, I went over to the counter and started up the

computer there. When I checked my email, I found a long message from Shinokawa. “Good morning, this is Shinokawa,” it began. The body of the email contained a long list of work instructions followed by her sign off, “I’ll leave everything to you. If there’s anything you need, please send me an email.”

All of her instructions since my first day of work had been sent through email. In the Ofuna General Hospital, where Shinokawa was staying, the use of cellphones was prohibited in the patient ward. She could call from the lobby, but she probably wasn’t in a state where she could leave the bed.

Of course, if I had anything to tell her, I could head over to the hospital myself. However, there hadn’t been any customers, so there wasn’t really any reason for me to go see her.

My morning “work” included preparing deliveries based on customer invoice requests. The Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia had listings in antique books catalogs, as well as books available for purchase online. Most of the shop’s income seemed to come from remote purchases like those. I suppose that was why the shop could run just fine without any in-store customers.

I searched through avenues of books, looking for the contents of the invoices.

At this point, I had realized that the shop mostly sold specialty books, covering topics like literature, history, philosophy, and the arts. There were a few manga and paperbacks for sale as well, but these were older books that I had never heard of.

I took the books I had found, and returned to the counter. I then packed them up, carefully checking through the email Shinokawa had sent as I worked.

It probably goes without saying but, she only wrote about work in her emails. For some reason, it felt like there was subtext behind the words, “If there’s anything you need.” She seemed to be saying, “please do not contact me if there is nothing going on, and do not go

to the hospital.”

I didn’t think she would be happy to hear any chitchat from me. The image of her whispering, “...Is that so,” and then reverting back to silence appeared clearly in my mind. Of course, it would be vastly different if it had anything to do with books. If that were the case, I’m sure she’d give me an animated explanation, her eyes shining. That was something I looked forward to.

The door creaked open. I lifted my head and found an old lady with white hair walking into the shop. She looked extremely refined, with a neat, plain dress on and a parasol dangling from her arm.

I didn’t recognize her at all, but I supposed she was someone who lived nearby. She must have come straight from the supermarket, since she was holding a grocery bag in her hand. She smiled and nodded at me, and I nodded back at her. The morning customers are all old people like her.

The old woman went around the shop once, stopping occasionally to excitedly flip through the books. Finally, she nodded at me again and opened the glass door. She probably hadn’t been able to find a book she wanted to buy.

The old woman stepped aside as she exited, making room for another customer who was just arriving.

I stopped what I was doing, surprised by how oddly dressed the new customer was. His head was bald, and his eyes were large and wide. He was a short man, and I could tell from the wrinkles on his tanned face that he was in his late 50’s. He had on an oversized T-shirt with a Union Jack flag on it and jeans that were tattered along the edges. His neck had a pink towel draped around it.

I didn’t know what his occupation was, but he definitely wasn’t a salaryman on his day off. He was holding a large bag made from picnic sheets.

The old woman seemed to be as shocked as I was. She tried to

squeeze by the bald man, as if trying to escape—but bumped into him as she went. At this moment, the bald man suddenly grabbed her shoulder.

“...Hey you, hold on for a moment.”

The baritone voice was filled with a menacing intent, and the old lady immediately turned as pale as paper. I hurriedly got up from my seat. This wasn’t some bustling street at night, but rather an antique bookshop during the day. I never expected to see such a dispute here.

“What are you doing!?”

I was about to pull the bald man aside, but he suddenly gritted his teeth and bellowed, “You idiot, why’re you grabbing me!? Here, look!”

He reached into the old lady’s shopping bag, and pulled out the item at the top. At that moment, I couldn’t help but exclaim. He was holding a large covered book, *Modernology* by Konwa Jirō and Yoshida Kenkichi. I had just placed it on the counter only moments before. The name was a little unique, so it had stuck in my memory. I returned to the counter, and found that there was, in fact, a book missing—in other words, she was a thief.

“Ah...”

She groaned in dismay. I was more surprised than shocked. The way she pretended to use the bookshelves as supports must have been a feint to help her steal books. I thought middle or high school students might try to steal something, but never expected that an old lady would do something like that.

“...I hope you can forgive me.”

She suddenly looked at me with begging eyes, a vast difference from the rich, lady-like attitude she had shown before. Perhaps this was her true nature.

“It’s not like I’m doing this because I like it. At my age, there are

times when I have to do this, so please spare me some sympathy here, please?”

She gave me a pitiful look. I felt incredibly awkward. I knew, as a member of the service industry, I was supposed to formally hand her over to the police, but I was a little hesitant to do so. Perhaps, since I was brought up by grandmother, it was hard for me to treat old women harshly.

“Such indecent things you’re saying for your age!” the bald man bellowed. “This world has no room for shameless old folks like you. You might as well sell chickens instead of stealing books!”

He was much more furious than I, as the employee, was. He grabbed the old lady again—I had to stop him. We were at a standstill in the narrow passage, when the old lady lowered her head slightly.

“Sorry to trouble you.”

She suddenly turned and ran out, quickly disappearing from sight. I hurried after her, but couldn’t find her anywhere. She was surprisingly fast for her age.

“She’s most likely a serial culprit,” the bald man said to me as I returned to the shop. “Be wary of thieves, will you? What’s the point of you watching the shop if this keeps up?”

“...I’m sorry.”

I lowered my head. I was grateful that he managed to stop the thief, but I was a little confused as to why he was lecturing me. Who was he?

When he noticed my shocked and doubtful stare, the man suddenly pointed at his chest and said, “My name’s Shida. I’m a regular here.”

The man who called himself Shida approached the counter and stacked seven or eight paperbacks there.

“...What are these?”

“Can’t you see? I’m selling these books.”

My heart throbbed a little. With these, I had a proper reason to go see Shinokawa. I delightedly returned to the counter.

“The person in charge of appraising isn’t here, so please leave them and come back tomorrow...”

“I know,” Shida said impatiently. “She’s hurt and hospitalized. Are you a new employee? You must really like this job. Don’t you find the shopkeeper weird? It’s rare to see such an introverted antiquarian bookshop owner.”

He was definitely a regular customer. He casually reached his hand towards the counter and drew a piece of paper from the file holder. It was the invoice slip for customers to record transactions. He had a better idea of where things were than I did.

He wrote in an ardent manner. As he did, I inadvertently noticed his right hand; his long, narrow fingers were heavily cracked and blackened with ink. This was the hand of someone living a tough life.

“Right, this should do it,” he said as he handed me the receipt. The address given was “Under the Bridge of the Kugenuma Beach in Fujisawa City.” I found this troubling. I thought I was rather familiar with the Kugenuma Beach area, but I had never heard of the place “under the bridge.”

“Where’s that?” I asked, noticing that nothing was written in the telephone number field.

“Hikijigawa river flows this way, and there’s a bridge right in front of the Kugenuma Beach. You know where I’m talking about? It’s slightly up from coastal road.”

Shiba drew an imaginary map with his index finger as he spoke.

“Yes.”

“It’s right below the bridge.”

I stared at his face without looking away—and after a while, I understood what he meant. This man was homeless.

“I picked up these books recently. I’m a book hunter.”

“Book hunter?”

What does that mean? Rather than answer my question, Shida merely smiled and tapped at the books in his hands a few times.

“Anyway, bring these to the hospital and get the shopkeeper to appraise them. They might not look it, but these are decent books. Your shopkeeper will definitely love them.”

“Ah, well—”

I wanted to ask Shida what he meant by “book hunter,” but before I could, he leaned his body over the counter as if he was afraid someone would overhear. It was all quite pointless, as I was the only other person in the shop. He really exaggerated his actions.

“...Well, there’s something I want to ask the shopkeeper about. Can you please pass it on to her for me?”

“Huh?”

I didn’t know what he meant at all, but he didn’t give me any room to interject.

“I’m a regular customer here, so there’s no problem, I guess?... Anyway, it happened yesterday ...”

As I remained speechless, Shida began his story.

That evening, I went to the hospital. Shinokawa’s sister had no club activities in the afternoon, so she took over at the shop. As I knocked on the hospital door, I heard a soft voice from within. The sound was vague and muffled, but it seemed to be coming from Shinokawa.

We hadn’t seen each other in three days, but I wasn’t particularly

excited. I was still thinking about the customer, Shida, who had come to the shop earlier—about the “request” he had presented to us.

“This is Goura. Please excuse me,” I said as I opened the door.

“I just emailed you. The book appraisal...”

I was suddenly speechless. Shinokawa was on the bed, drying her hair with towel. It seemed she had just taken a shower, turning her usually white skin a pale cherry pink. As soon as she noticed me, she stopped what she was doing and got very still.

“Sorry. I’ll wait in the corridor.”

Flustered, I headed outside.

“It—it’s fine...please come in...”

Shinokawa quietly called out to me, lowering her head as she motioned for me to sit down. Her beautiful, glossy black hair was drenched, drooping over her eyes. I inadvertently gulped.

“I—I just...showered...I thought you would come by later...erm, sorry...”

She seemed to be saying that she had just showered because she thought I would arrive later, but that she was sorry for her current appearance.

“No, you don’t have to apologize to me about that.”

The shop was being attended to, so I came by earlier than expected. I coughed for a while; if there was silence, I’d inadvertently think too much about the scene in front of me.

“You showered in the hospital’s bathroom?”

She nodded. The fragrance of her shampoo still lingered in the air.

“Helped me do it...”

Shinokawa murmured as she put aside the towel. She probably wanted to say that the nurse helped her shower. I see.

She suddenly took a deep breath, as if trying to relax. As she did, her chest rose greatly beneath her pajamas, and my vision instantly settled there. I thought she was a petite person, but I may have been mistaken—ah, am I an idiot? What would happen if she found out? Better get down to proper business.

“Can you look at these books?”

I handed over the bag I had brought along. To be honest, I was a little skeptical. The paperbacks Shida brought didn’t seem to be as good as he advertised, and they didn’t look old at all.

However, once Shinokawa took out the books, her attitude changed.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

Shinokawa squealed in delight, like a child receiving a Christmas present. She embraced the books tightly. With the spines pressing into her breasts, I was at a loss for where to look.

“Look!”

Her eyes dazzled, and she turned the spines towards me. They were all published by Chikuma Publishing and Kodansha Arts Publishing. There I saw the three volumes of *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens, the first and second halves of *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, the Limited Edition, *Gentle Love Story of Nishōtei* by Shikiba Ryūzaburō, the first and second halves of Sugiyama Shigemaru’s *Hundred Demons*.... It seemed each book was cryptic in content, and I didn’t know what was so good about them.

“...Are they really that valuable?”

“Yes. Each book can sell for two or three thousand yen.”

“Eh? Really?”

I was shocked. That was more expensive than I thought. Those books didn’t look that old.

“All these books are highly rated by critics, and there haven’t been any reprints. It’s possible to purchase hardcover copies, but they can’t be bought with just two, three thousand yen. There’s a huge demand for such limited edition books in the antique books market.”

I remembered Shida’s spirited look. He may look suspicious, but his ability to pick books was not to be underestimated. I was a little concerned as to how he got the books though. He said that he had picked them up recently.

“A customer named Shida brought them in.”

“Ah, so it was him after all! I was wondering if he was the one,” she said excitedly.

“He specializes in these types of books.”

“Specializes? What does he do?”

“That man’s a book hunter. Did he not say so?”

“He did … but what’s a book hunter?”

I hadn’t gotten the chance to ask the man himself, as he never gave me the opportunity.

“They’re people who buy cheap books from antique book stores and sell them at high prices. Mr. Shida goes around the new antique bookshops in the area every day.”

This was the first I had heard of such a thing. I didn’t know people could earn a living that way.

“Then why did he call himself a ‘book hunter’?”

“There are many given explanations. One is that they hunt through bookshelves for any potentially valuable titles¹. Mr. Shida has always specialized in rare books trading … he may even know more than I do.”

“...”

So Shida was a special customer who could contribute rare book titles to our shop. I couldn't help but regret what had happened earlier; if only I had listened to him seriously.

“Did Mr. Shida make any requests?”

She looked at me through bespectacled eyes.

“H-how did you know?”

“He always does this whenever he sells good books to us. He wants to purchase some limited edition books of a certain publishing unit...am I right?”

She gave a sweet smile as she said this. I guessed it was because he often came to the store with requests. Since he wanted to sell his books to this antiquarian book shop, it would be better to keep a good relationship with him.

“Hm, how do I put it...it's about a limited edition book.”

I didn't know where to begin. It was a request that was a little—no, very intriguing. Anyway, I first took a note from my pocket, something I had jotted down to prevent myself from forgetting.

“He wants us to get the First Edition of Koyama Kiyoshi's *Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen...*”

“It's an anthology from Shinchō Paperback. It seems like the first edition was released in the 30th year of the Showa Era.”

Shinokawa's reply was immediate, and filled with detail.

“In that case, our shop should have some entries. It's really not uncommon...”

“No. He doesn't want a book in our stock.”

I shook my head.

“His request was, ‘My book's been stolen, and I hope you can help me get it back.’”

“Eh?”

She blinked her eyes. I arranged Shida's long description in my mind. It would be better, I thought, to convey what he had said in the correct order.

“... I don’t have any money, and I’m not young anymore. Right now, I’m still satisfied with my life. I don’t have to be a burden for others, and can still live on my own. Not all old people complain about unreasonable things like that woman who just stole.”

“There are some books I won’t sell no matter what. Everyone can have a book they treasure, right? For me, that would be Koyama Kiyoshi’s anthology *Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen*. You’ve never... read it before? Such an unstudious person.”

“That book was basically my talisman. I always put it in my bag and brought it along so that I could read it whenever I wanted to... but then yesterday ... it was stolen.”

“Isn’t there a path to Kobukuroya on that side, over to the northwest? It’s the place overlapping with the coastal road. You know the first traffic light when you head down the coastal path?... Right. There’s a cross junction. The left leads to Ofuna station, and there’s a temple in front². I rode a bicycle there yesterday afternoon.”

“Why, you ask? For work, work. Recently, I agreed to exchange books there with someone like me. The second half of *The Coming of the Book* that I just brought, I got from him.”

“...Huh? You’re asking me if I only have the second volume? Are you serious? The latter volumes of such a rare book series are harder to get. Some people only buy the first volume and not the second, not the other way around, right? There are fewer copies of the second volume on the market, and that makes them more valuable.”

“We agreed to meet outside the temple. I arrived there first and

parked my bicycle at the pine tree beside the shrine gates...there wasn't anyone around, and it was very quiet. I didn't bring my watch, but I guess it should have been almost 2pm."

"The temple in Kamakura isn't a very large one, and there weren't many visitors, especially since it was so hot yesterday. I fared well under the shade of the trees, though. Much better than the poor, sweltering folks waiting at the bus station."

"I was bored and had nothing to do, so I decided to read a book under the tree. My bag was in my bicycle basket, and naturally, I had my Koyama Kiyoshi book with me."

"Just when I was about to take it out, I suddenly felt my stomach ache. It probably isn't proper of me to say this, but I've been having diarrhea for the past few days. I want to watch my food intake, but it's really hot, and my house doesn't have a fridge."

"I went to look for a restroom, but there was no sign of any convenience stores or restrooms nearby. Instead, I went to the temple. I thought there would be a restroom for tourists to use there."

"Before I left, I placed my bag and bicycle under the tree, thinking that nobody would steal them. It was really careless of me, and now that I think about it, a grave mistake."

"I passed through the gates and went down the path to the temple **|3|**. After a while, I heard a crash from behind. I looked back and found a young girl lying beside a bicycle. My first thought was that she crashed into my bicycle, since it was parked somewhere along the pedestrian pathway."

"Are you alright?" I asked the girl... well, that girl was about 16, 17 years old, had short hair, and was rather tall. If not for the fact that she was wearing a skirt, I would have assumed she was a boy.""

"All our stuff was scattered in front of the temple, including the book I just mentioned."

“Sorry, could you please help me lift this bicycle?” I said loudly. Well... I guess I reached my limit there, because I had no strength left to pick everything up and put it all back in the bicycle basket.”

“The girl, however, did not look back, ignored my bag, and instead just picked up her own dropped bag in order to check if everything was still there... I didn’t know what was inside, but the plain maroon paper bag looked pretty high-class.”

“Then the kid started to look around. It seemed like something very important had fallen out of her bag. Suddenly, she picked something up and ran off.”

“To be honest, I felt it was a little strange. That kid picked up what looked like a paperback. Anyway, when I came back from the restroom, my friend had already arrived, and he helped me pick up my stuff. I thanked him and looked inside my bag, only to find that my Koyama Kiyoshi was book missing... it took me a while to realize what had happened.”

“I asked my friend, and he said that he just passed a tall girl. He told me that he saw her cross the road and that she seemed to be heading for the bus stop. Of course, by the time I got there, there was no one there and the bus had already left.”

“I bid my friend farewell, and checked the bus stop one more time just in case, but she wasn’t there after all. I guess she got on the bus.”

“Anyway, I couldn’t get my beloved book back. So, there’s something I want to ask this shop...”

“Huh? You’re asking me why the girl stole the book? Isn’t that obvious? That kind of old book is definitely worth a lot of money; she must have intended to sell it!”

“That’s why, when I thought about it, I realized this antiquarian book shop is the closest one to the temple. If that kid brings in my Koyama Kiyoshi book, can you help me buy it back quietly? I’ll pay for it.”

“...The police? No, I don’t want to call the police. I don’t want to catch the culprit, I just want to get my book back. There are times when people do the wrong things in a stupor... but I don’t really want to give her a piece of my mind.”

“Anyway, please help me notify your shop owner... I’ll come back again later tonight. I’m off then!”

“...And that’s what he said. What do you think?”

I crudely summarized what happened and looked over at Shinokawa. Her hands were folded on her knees, and she seemed pensive.

“I guess Mr. Shida really likes Koyama Kiyoshi’s works. I first noticed this when he prevented that book theft.”

She said calmly. I was about to nod in agreement—

“Eh? That has nothing to do with Mr. Shida’s request, right?”

I merely mentioned that he prevented a theft offhandedly when I was explaining Shida’s request. Shinokawa smiled and shook her head.

“The anthology Mr. Shida had would certainly contain Koyama’s signature work, **Monument Gleaning**. Do you know what it’s about?”

“No...”

“It’s a short story featuring an insipid description of a poor novelist’s daily life. Of course, the basis of the story is the author himself. He meets a young girl in an old bookshop who gives him a birthday present. And when he opens the wrapping ... ahh, sorry, I went on a tangent again.”

I had already leaned forward unconsciously. I was actually more interested in how he met the girl and what happened when the present was opened than in Shida. But she deliberately coughed and changed the subject.

“Back to the main topic, the opening of *Monument Gleaning* has a line like this.”

She looked up and recited fluently, “If possible, I hope to age faster, to a point when my back arches and prevents me from doing anything. When that happens, I may try raising a few chickens to make a living, but not all old people spend their time grumbling about the misfortunes of the world.”

I was a little surprised. This truly was similar what Shida said to the old lady. I did think it was weird when he suddenly mentioned selling chickens.

But right now, I was more shocked by something else.

“...Do you memorize all the novels you read?”

Upon hearing this, she waved her hands in a flustered manner.

“H-how could I? That’s not it. Memorizing everything is... I just remember the good parts...”

“Eh? Isn’t that amazing? I’ve never met anyone like that before.”

I expressed my true thoughts, but her response was beyond my expectations. Stupefied, her mouth hung wide open, and her face turned bright red.

“...I-it feels weird to be complimented.”

“Eh? Is that so?”

“This is the first time someone’s ever said that I was amazing...”

She peered at me from behind her spectacles, and just when her eyes were about to meet mine, she suddenly lowered her head again. I felt a little lost as to what I should do.

“...A-anyway, I suppose we should help Mr. Shida.”

The room took on a peculiar atmosphere. Shinokawa coughed again to change the topic.

“Mr. Goura, please take note if anyone comes back to sell *Monument*

Gleaning + Saint Andersen. Also..."

Her forehead wrinkled in a frown above her glasses.

"...I do wonder about something."

"Wonder?"

"Did that girl really steal the book for money?"

I had been wondering this too. Maybe if she were a book hunter like Shida, but would an ordinary person think of selling a random old book off the street?

"I feel like it's a little strange to only steal a single book," she said.

"Mr. Shida agreed to exchange books with another book hunter. That meant that Mr. Shida had other items that were worth something. If she wanted money, don't you find it weird that she left those other items behind...?"

I nodded. It certainly was intriguing. Shinokawa, who had been folding her arms, suddenly uncrossed them and leaned towards me. I thought it looked like the pose of a magazine model, but I hurriedly dispelled that notion.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Mr Shida won't get his lost book back if this keeps up...why don't we look for that girl?"

"Eh..."

I never thought of that. Was there a need to go to such extremes for that book hunter? However, I resisted the urge to disagree. Shinokawa's large eyes widened. Even without any books to bring in, this incident could be the best excuse for me to be here.

At the same time, my enthusiasm to search for the culprit kindled within me.

"Let's help out then. I've been thinking about doing this too, actually," I said with conviction, or at least something close to that.

She happily clapped her hands in front of her chest.

“Thank you very much. I knew you’d say that, Mr. Goura.”

Upon hearing her say that, I couldn’t help but feel a little touched. So she really trusts me?

Just when my mood changed for the better, she continued, “But if the girl’s not going to sell it for money, why did she steal the book? What do you think, Mr. Goura?”

I was a little startled at this sudden question. I actually intended to hear her out all the way, just like how it went when she unraveled the mystery behind the *Sōseki’s Complete Collection* the last time.

“Ah, yeah... maybe she stole it because she wanted to read a book? Or maybe she wanted to read, but couldn’t find a book?”

“I think the chances of that are rather slim.”

Shinokawa firmly denied this with a twinkle in her eyes. Her expression showed more conviction than any words she could’ve used.

“This book isn’t really considered rare, and it’s not hard to find in old book shops. There was a reprint 15 years ago.”

“Then... ah, yes, maybe she took the wrong book during the mix up...”

I heard from Shida that the girl’s bag dropped. There was no way to be sure she didn’t have a similar book, and took the wrong one in the confusion.

“I thought of that too, but in that situation, the girl’s book would have remained at the scene... I think there must have been a reason why she stole the book.”

“Hmm...”

I couldn’t think of any more explanations. This would be the limit of my mental abilities—no, wait, wasn’t this weird?

“If she’s not selling it for money or to read, why did she steal the book?”

“Yes, I do feel that is the crux of the incident,” Shinokawa said spiritedly.

“The real reason why the book was stolen will lead us to the girl. Let’s investigate this.”

“Eh... but how do we go about doing that?”

“From what Mr. Shida told you, I understand a few things.”

She raised her delicate index finger as she said this.

“First, she was very anxious back then. She knocked into the bicycle parked at the side of pedestrian pathway because she was running too fast.”

“...Yeah.”

I nodded to prompt her, and she raised her middle finger.

“Second, the bus arrives infrequently. According to what Mr. Shida said, there were people waiting at the bus stop... I can guess that she was in a hurry trying to get there.”

I started to gradually understand. The girl was anxious because there were others waiting for the bus.

“But this is confusing. She was anxious, but why didn’t she run to the station after getting up... he said she checked through the contents of her bag and looked around first.”

“Ah, yes. She was looking around for the item she dropped...”

“But she didn’t pick up the item she dropped... she picked up Mr. Shida’s book. I think there’s another possibility.”

She enunciated as she spoke.

“Maybe the item in her bag didn’t fall out, maybe she was checking her bag because the item broke or something?”

“Broke? What kind of item is that?”

“I don’t know...in that case, it might be possible she took the book to replace the broken item or to use it to repair something. She looked around anxiously, picked up a paperback...”

I continued to stare at her intently. It was the same as when she solved the *Sōseki’s Complete Collection*. She could deduce so much given so few clues, and she didn’t even need to leave the ward room.

However, there was something I didn’t understand.

“...Anyway, what are paperbacks used for?”

Shinokawa sighed, and bent her raised fingers. She might not have realized it herself, but she looked as adorable as a lucky cat ⁴, to the point that it made me feel awkward.

“I can’t think this through no matter how I try. There’s too little information,” she said sternly while maintaining her lucky cat pose.

“...Maybe we should ask the book hunter who met with Mr. Shida. He might know something.”

“Eh? Why?”

“Mr. Shida’s associate said that he brushed by the girl, but he wouldn’t have known where she went if he had only brushed by her. He knew she went to the bus stop because he looked back, right?”

“...I see.”

My interest was piqued again.

Shida said he would stop by the shop later. Would I have to ask him how to contact the other book hunter?

“But Mr. Shida’s friend might not come here.”

“Yes, that’s true. I think we should be the ones to visit him.”

“I see... wait, who’s going to ask?”

She looked at me doubtfully. That was a really stupid question. Shinokawa couldn’t leave this hospital. Wasn’t it obvious that I’d

have to go?

The next day was a day off for the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.

It was the first day off there'd been since I started working there. I was spending my free time outdoors, baking under the sunlight. I parked my scooter in front of the Kamakura temple, the scene of the "crime".

I stood under the shade of a pine tree, wiping my sweat as I looked around. This place was close to my old high school, and I often used to come here for school trips— Kamakura temple sightseeing was a staple activity at schools here. The houses were positioned not too differently from how they were back then. It was near the coastal road, but I couldn't find any convenience stores or family restaurants. This was a quiet residential area, and I couldn't find any pedestrians no matter where I looked.

I had agreed to meet Shida's associate here.

Shida had come to the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia last night, and was extremely delighted to hear that we'd look for the thief girl (and about the prices his books would sell for). He told me he had something he wanted to ask his book hunter friend, so he called him using the phone in the shop. I didn't talk to Shida's associate directly, but apparently he cheerfully agreed to meet me, and told Shida when and where.

"You should read *Monument Gleaning* sometime," Shida said after he contacted his associate. "The first time I read that book was when I was just starting up as a book hunter. I didn't intend to do what I'm doing now, but my company and family was in a mess and ... but I guess it's nothing much. I do find it blissful reading under the bridge."

Shida first appeared at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia several years ago, and Shinokawa didn't know where and what he used to do for a living before that.

"In the book, the main character's just a poor man who's not good

at building relationships and is bad in social situations. My wish to live a completely content life was simply a wish. It's all the more impossible to find an innocent and benevolent girl who could treat such a man gently, I guess."

Shida's tone was much gentler than his words. He spoke as if talking about a brother.

"But though the author knew this very well, he still wrote this story. You'll understand if you read it... I really found myself empathizing with the author of such a blissful story."

I nodded—I really did want to read it.

"...Actually, I know it's difficult to get that book back, but I'm unwilling to give up so easily... I won't blame you even if you can't find it, so please don't worry... send my regards to the Baron."

"...What does he mean by Baron?"

I muttered under the pine tree. Is that the book hunter's nickname? Shida never told me what he looked like, but I guess I would know when I saw him.

I checked the clock on my cellphone. It was slightly past the meeting time. Just when I was starting to get annoyed—

"May I ask why you're here?"

I heard an inquiring voice behind me. I looked back and found a tall man in a white shirt walking over from the temple gates. He was probably in his late twenties and had curly hair and long eyes. His untanned skin smelled of cologne, and if not for the leather business bag he was carrying, I would have believed he was a model taking photos in his free time. Was he returning from a grave visit?

"I'm waiting for someone."

Upon hearing my answer, the man's eyes shined and he revealed his teeth in a passionate smile.

“In other words, you’re the same as me. I walked around the temple because I came by a little early.... Are you the one helping Mr. Shida find his book?”

“Yes.”

The man held my hands tightly and shook them a few times. I was still a little confused, and I alternated between looking at his hands and his face.

“I’m Mr. Shida’s friend Kasai. For some reason, he gave me the nickname Baron.”

Kasai shrugged his shoulders. Anyway, he was just like a pretty boy in a painting, and I really wanted to call him something regal.

Kasai presented me with a business card. Naturally, I didn’t have one.

“I’m Goura. I work at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia.” I had no choice but to introduce myself verbally.

“Ah, so you’re from that antique book shop? I’ve passed it before, but never actually gone in. Are you the owner?”

“No, I’m just a shop attendant. I just started working there.”

“Is that so? Please allow me to visit when I have time in the future,” he said with clarity.

“All I know is that you’re Mr. Shida’s friend, so I thought you’d be a book hunter too. I’m really sorry to call you out on a work day.”

Kasai scratched his head slightly. He looked a little scrawny, but he didn’t seem to be a bad person.

I looked down at the business card in my hands, at the words, “Owner of Kasai Bookstore” above the name Kasai Kikuya. I heard that he was a book hunter before, but it seemed he also operated a shop.

“Kasai Bookstore is the name of the online shop I use. Normally, I specialize in purchases, which I then sell online, so my methods are

a little different from Mr. Shida's."

I could not help but marvel at these people called book hunters. It's true that it would be faster to sell books to customers directly rather than through other shops. This method of operation was probably no different than any ordinary antiquarian book shop.

"I'm not too knowledgeable about books, and most of my merchandise is limited edition albums and games. I've exchanged goods with Mr. Shida before, and, luckily, our specialties don't clash with each other."

Looking at his attire alone, he did not seem to be someone lacking in funds. He seemed to be a rather capable book hunter.

"Oh yes. Is this about the kid who took Mr. Shida's book?"

I recovered upon hearing Kasai mention the true reason for this meeting. I then explained to him what Shinokawa discovered; that the current information we had was not enough for us to look for the girl. After hearing my story, Kasai raised his eyebrows.

"What? I described it fully to Mr. Shida. He never said such an important book was stolen."

"Do you know something?"

"I know more than you think. I didn't just brush by her, actually. Come, follow me," Kasai said, as he went to the coastal road. We were headed right towards the bus stop, and I could see the traffic lights and cross junction just up ahead. He stopped in front of the old gates leading to the temple rafters.

"It might be more appropriate to say that we met each other by chance. It was around 2pm, and I was walking over from the road junction. She was squatting in front of this gate doing something, and I could hear a rustling sound."

The gates were slightly concave into the garden, and I couldn't see the scenery within. I looked back at the pine tree. It seemed the girl must have come here and waited for a while after stealing the book.

“What was she doing?”

“Her back was facing me, so I’m not too sure. There was a maroon bag placed on the ground, and she had her hand inside. She seemed really anxious, looking at the station from time to time. I thought it was weird, but since I had an appointment I started on my way. Just when I was about to leave, she called out to me.”

I was a little surprised.

“Eh? You talked to the girl?”

“Yes. She asked me, ‘Do you have a pair of scissors?’”

“Scissors?”

“Yes, scissors to cut paper. I thought she would ask something else, and to be honest, I’ve never heard of pedestrians asking others to lend them scissors...but I just so happened to have a pair with me. I often have to deliver goods by mail, and it helps a lot with tying packages.”

Kasai took out a pair of stainless steel scissors and contentedly opened and closed them.

I stared at the glittering blades. If it was as Shinokawa said, that the book was used to repair something, would that mean Shida’s book was cut into pieces?

“I didn’t know Mr. Shida’s book was stolen when I lent her the scissors, and she looked really embarrassed. She only used them for a little bit, and then returned them to me.”

“Did you see what she did?”

“Her bag was turned away from me, and I couldn’t see what was inside... no, wait. She was holding something when I lent her the scissors. I guess that was...”

Kasai looked up at the sky for a while, before slowly continuing, “...I think it was an cooler.”

“Cooler?”

“The kind of thing you use to keep food cold, you know?”

I knew that, but I didn’t understand why the girl would be holding one.

“Does that mean the bag contained food or something?”

“Maybe, but I couldn’t tell either way.”

A paperback, scissors, and a cooler — I had no idea what linked them all.

“After returning the scissors to me, she immediately crossed the road and ran over to the bus stop.”

Kasai pointed at the bus stop on the opposite side of the road. There was a female high school student with her uniform on waiting there. It was the uniform of my alma mater. She was probably going home after her club activities, and there was a bow bag taller than her standing on the ground.

“Another high school student was waiting for the bus here yesterday, but it was a blond boy with a guitar strapped behind his back... the bus hadn’t arrived, and it was meaningless to watch on, so I headed to the temple.”

“So the girl got on the bus, right?”

“She should have been able to, but she never did.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

She should be able to ride the bus from here to Ofuna station. I always thought she was headed to the station.

“I reached the gates, and started to pack up Mr. Shida’s belongings. After a while, I was a little concerned about that kid, so I looked back at the station. The bus just so happened to be leaving, and the other passengers had already gotten on, but she was still standing there all alone.”

“She was already at the station. She didn’t get on the bus?”

“That’s how it was. I don’t know why, though. After that, she carried the bag in her arms towards the street junction, and that’s all I saw.”

I tilted my head. After hearing Kasai’s description, I had even more questions. She had a cooler in her bag, stole a book, used scissors to cut something, ran to the station, did not board the bus, and watched it leave—I had no idea what was going on at all.

As soon as I left Kasai, my phone rang. It was an unknown number, and I hesitated a little before picking up. “Yes?” I said. I waited for a reply, but the line remained silent.

“Hello, may I ask who is calling?”

There was still no reply. Was it a prank call?

“What in the world, seriously,”

I said impatiently. But just when I was about to hang up the phone

“...This is Shinokawa.”

Her soft voice shocked me.

“Shinokawa? Erm, why did you call all of a sudden...”

My mind was in complete chaos. I did tell her my number before, but I never thought she would really call me. She wasn’t allowed to use the phone in the room she was staying in, but it was possible to send me emails using the computer.

“I-I’m, in the corridor now... I just came out of the rehab room...”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered there was a space in the corridor there for patients to make calls. She must have called from there. It would have been better if she had told me that right from the beginning.

“I was really curious about what the book hunter told you... so I gave you a call. I’m really sorry... so...”

She was about to hang up, and to my surprise, I inadvertently raised my voice when I spoke into the phone.

“Wai-wai-wait, please wait!”

If she hung up like this, this misunderstanding would probably continue.

“There’s something I want to ask you. I just finished my conversation with the book hunter!”

I started relaying what I had heard from Kasai without further ado. Luckily, she didn’t hang up, but I got the feeling she was getting more and more confused as I went. It was unlikely that anyone could understand such fragmented information over the phone.

I got all the way to the point where the girl crossed the road when, showing no surprise or doubt, Shinokawa asked, “...She left the bus stop with the bag like that?”

I heaved a sigh of relief. Her attitude had changed the moment the conversation turned to books. This was the Shinokawa that solved mysteries.

“Eh? Yes, that seems to be the case,” I answered. I really couldn’t think of anything else important. Shinokawa let out a sigh.

“...I see. I understand now.”

“Understand what?”

“What she wanted to do, and why she stole the book...”

I widened my mouth in shock.

“Eh, really?”

“I don’t know everything, but I have a rough idea of what happened.”

“Amazing! I couldn’t think of anything...”

I was really shocked she was able to deduce the truth from what I had said. It seemed I was wrong to think nobody could crack this

case. Shinokawa could could figure out anything that had to do with books.

“...No, I’m not that amazing...”

She went silent. Even though I was still excited , I felt that something was amiss. She said she solved the case, but still sounded dejected. She didn’t seem happy at all.

“So, what did you figure out?”

Affected by her mood, my voice softened. After a while, she spoke.

“...It was a present.”

“Huh?”

“That girl had a present in her bag, probably food that required cooling. Since the bag wasn’t from any store, I suppose she made the food herself rather than buying it. She was anxious because she wanted to deliver it in person.”

“To who...”

At that moment, I recalled Kasai’s words. There was another person waiting for the bus, a young man with blond hair carrying a guitar on his back.

“And the reason why she didn’t get on the bus is...”

“She didn’t intend to get on the bus. She just wanted to give the boy her present... but got into trouble in the meantime. She knocked into Mr. Shida’s bicycle and fell over... and the bag with the present dropped to the floor.”

“...Did it break inside?”

I remembered the cookie sandwich I had eaten with Shinokawa. That was my most recent dessert. Was it something like that?

“No, if it’s broken, it can’t be given. What was broken wasn’t the dessert... there was something around the dessert.”

“Around?”

“It’s a present to the opposite gender, so it was probably delicately wrapped. Maybe the decoration or something broke, and she had to repack it again quickly, but she didn’t bring anything to do it with. There weren’t any convenience stores nearby either … at that moment, her eyes spotted Mr. Shida’s book…”

“But there’s something weird about this,” I interrupted. I had been listening quietly, but I really couldn’t follow.

“I’ve never heard of using book pages to wrap something.”

“…I don’t think she used the book either. What I want to say is…”

The sound of a bus door opening chimed. I was looking at the large bus in front of the station when I noticed. I inadvertently let out a cry.

A young man got off the bus. His school pants were partially covered by a white shirt, and he had a guitar case on his back. He was probably headed to school for practice. My alma mater would always hold cultural festivals right after summer vacation. Did he form a band with his friends and join the light music club?

His short hair was bright and blond. He must have bleached it.

“…What is it?”

“A high school student just got off the bus. It might be the guy who was waiting at the bus stop yesterday when the book was stolen…”

“Go after him!”

Shinokawa blurted into the phone.

“Please ask him about that girl.”

“Got it. I’ll call you later.”

I hung up for the time being and trotted over. I saw public bus close its doors and leave. The boy had his back to me as he walked. If the school rules hadn’t changed, students should have been banned from having such brightly dyed hair. He probably dyed it this eye-catching color because it was the summer holidays.

“Sorry, may I disturb you for a moment?”

The boy stopped and looked back. He immediately glared at me, his eyes long and narrow. He was probably scowling at me like that on purpose.

“...What?” he said unhappily, dragging out the word. This was a common manner of speaking here, and I used to do the same thing when I was in middle and high school.

“A few days ago, did a girl come to this bus stop...?” I asked. It was then that I realized. If it was true that the girl still had her bag when she left, then the boy must not have accepted her present.

“...A girl tried to give you a present, right? That’s what I wanted to ask you about.”

The boy looked as if he’d eaten something bitter, and frowned.

“Ah, you mean Kosuga? What, do you know her?”

I committed the name “Kosuga” to memory. This boy seemed to know her.

“There’s something I want to ask her about. Could you please tell me her address, or how to contact her for that matter?”

“...Are you the police?”

“Ah, no...”

I didn’t know how to continue. I failed. In my haste to call him, I couldn’t think of what to ask him at all. No one would give the personal information of an acquaintance just because someone asked. But, after thinking about it a little, he heartily took out his phone and showed me his contacts. A phone number and email address were listed right below the name, Kosuga Nao.

“She probably lives around here, I don’t really know that much about her. Is the phone number and email address enough?”

“...Thanks,” I said doubtfully. The boy suddenly curled his lips, and gave a thin smile befitting a painting. He seemed to have practiced

it in front of the mirror.

“Did that brat do something bad? She’s a strange one,” he said with amusement, showing no concern at all for the girl called Kosuga Nao. I could tell he was extremely delighted.

“...What do you mean?”

“You’re looking for her for some reason, right? How come? Are you going to abduct her and throw her in the deep sea?”

I frowned. It seemed he thought of me as a delinquent. My appearance often gave this impression.

“You don’t really know her?”

“Not really. We just happen to be in the same class. I do talk to her in the classroom sometimes, but I really hate women with bad attitudes.”

“So you rejected the present?”

“Even if it’s my birthday, I do have the right to refuse, right? She was so shocked when I told her I didn’t want her present.”

So he acted friendly in school, but was completely different behind the scenes. He was someone who could enjoy rejecting a present, who could actually tell a stranger someone’s personal information.

There was no reason for me to get involved, but the more I listened, the worse my mood got. I needed a way to contact Kosuga Nao, however. I let him use his infrared communication to send the data to my cellphone.

“I’ll be off then. I still have club activities.”

After the boy left, I stayed there for a while. Although I got an important piece of information, I couldn’t bring myself to be happy.

While scouting for book related clues, we discovered that a girl had tried to give a boy a birthday present, and he had rejected her gift. Shinokawa probably wanted to be certain if Kosuga Nao took

the bag with her when she left.

I suddenly recalled Koyama Kiyoshi's *Monument Gleaning*. After Shida recommended it to me, I bought a copy of Koyama Kiyoshi's short story anthology. It had been a while since I personally bought a book with printed text. *Monument Gleaning* was a very short novel, and I barely managed to finish it before I started feeling uncomfortable.

The protagonist, a novelist, was extremely poor and lived his life peacefully every day. He was destitute, but he had quite the idle life. He spent his time buying things, cooking, and reading books.

One day, he became friends with a young girl from an old bookstore who called herself a "protector of the books." This hardworking and down-to-earth girl gave the protagonist a nail clipper and an ear pick. In the end, the protagonist accepted the presents heartily.

The story was overly blissful, just as Shida had said. It could cause people to forget the bitterness and loneliness of reality. Of course, it wasn't clear if these things had actually happened to the protagonist. One could think it was all a fictitious diary written by the protagonist, and, by extension, the author.

A present that could cause someone to feel such warmth would never exist in reality. Even if someone were to give something like that, there was the possibility of rejection, just like what happened to Kosuga.

I recovered from my deep thoughts. Anyway, I would first tell Shinokawa what I heard from the boy, and then discuss with her what to do next.

I took out my cellphone, and dialed her number.

The sun was setting outside the window, and a narrow crescent moon appeared in the sky, looking just ready to disappear. I sat on

the chair beside the bed, and checked the time on my cellphone.

It was 7 pm, the appointed time.

“...She’ll be here, right?” I asked Shinokawa.

“She’ll come... that’s what she told me.”

After I explained everything that happened, Shinokawa sent Kosuga Nao an email informing her that we were looking for the book in place of its owner and hoped she would make a trip to the hospital.

“I’ll go,” she said simply. She had something to say to us—I guess.

“It’s good if she can return the book.”

Kosuga Nao borrowed scissors from Kasai, and definitely cut the book in some way. I supposed the book would be incomplete.

“...It’s fine. I don’t think the book will be cut to a point where it’s unreadable.”

“Why? Didn’t she cut it with scissors?”

“No, she cut...”

Before Shinokawa could finish, we heard a sharp knock on the door. We didn’t even have a chance to reply before the door swung open and a tall girl dressed in jeans and T-shirt walked in. She had well-defined eyes and a refined figure. I thought she looked more like a pretty boy than a pretty girl.

She walked into the middle of the room, stopped, looked around quickly, and lowered her head towards us with what seemed to be a glare on her face.

“...I’m Kosuga Nao.”

“He-hel-hello...I-I’m Shinokawa...”

Shinokawa’s eyes fluttered as she spoke her name.

“Huh? Be louder, yeah? I can’t hear anything when your voice’s so soft,” the girl chided forcefully. Shinokawa’s face immediately

turned beet red.

“No... erm... well...”

She was at a loss for what to say. Shinokawa seemed to be confused by Kosuga Nao’s sudden appearance. Why was the book thief the one acting justified, while the inquirer was fidgeting?

“We are from the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia near Kita-Kamakura station.”

There was no choice, so I spoke up for her. Even after stating our shop’s name, the girl showed no reaction at all. It seemed she didn’t know anything about our shop.

“I’m Goura Daisuke, the shop attendant there. This is the shop owner Shinokawa. The owner of the stolen book is a regular customer of ours, so we’re helping him look for it.”

Suddenly, I noticed that Kosuga Nao didn’t bring anything. Where was the stolen book?

“You stole the book, right?”

She folded her arms and raised her chest arrogantly.

“...So what.”

I didn’t know respond to such a rhetorical question. Was she denying her guilt, or did she intend to admit and apologize? This girl’s attitude was certainly bad, just like the boy said.

“How did you find my email address? I don’t remember telling anyone. Did you steal it from someone else?”

She was really infuriating me. Given her position, she had no right to begrudge others for peeping in on her.

“Your classmate told us.”

“Classmate? Who?”

“...A blond guy. I met him at the bus stop near your house.”

Suddenly, her face turned pale.

“...Is it Nishino?”

So that guy was called Nishino ... I had already noticed that the boy never told me his name back then. He was rather cautious when it came to his own personal information.

“Did you say anything to Nishino about that book?” Kosuga Nao said, a groan in her voice.

“No, not at all, but he told me right away.”

“Nishino...he actually...”

Her shoulders shuddered slightly. This girl had been let down twice, first when she gave the present, and second at this moment.

“Can you return the book?” I asked. Even if I said anything to console her, she wouldn’t feel relieved at all. What happened between Nishino and her was still her problem, and our job was to get Shida’s book back.

“...I can’t return it now.”

Kosuga Nao suddenly turned aside angrily.

“HUH?” I inadvertently raised my voice. “What do you mean you can’t return it?”

“Shut up! This has nothing to do with you, alright!? You definitely don’t know what happened anyway!”

“Wait, why are you angry!? You’re the one who stole the book...”

“...I think I know what happened,” Shinokawa suddenly said from the bed with her back straight as she stared at Kosuga Nao. The hesitant attitude she had shown before disappeared. It was like she had become a different person.

“I had intended to wait for the book’s owner to arrive before talking about your situation...or do you want me to tell him later?”

Her voice had a force that caused Kosuga Nao—and me—to quiet down instantly. It was just for a fleeting moment, however, and

soon the girl was glaring at Shinokawa again.

“Don’t talk like you understand. Can you even describe to me what happened?”

“...Yes, most probably,” Shinokawa answered without missing a beat. The girl’s stare became even more heinous.

“Explain it to me then. If you really can do it, show me.”

This was not good. If Shinokawa made a single mistake, Kosuga Nao probably wouldn’t return the book. Of course, this case could be solved if we called the police, but that wasn’t what Shida, the victim, wanted.

“Are you sure?”

I asked Shinokawa, not because I was doubting her innate insight, but because I was worried if she could convince the other party—however, she nodded without hesitation.

“Sure, it’s fine.”

Then, she closed her eyes and began her eloquent explanation.

“That day, you made a dessert for your classmate, Mr. Nishino, as a birthday present...you needed a cooler, and since it didn’t break even when it dropped on the floor, I guess it’s a tart or something similar. After wrapping it, you decorated it with a deep red ribbon, packed it inside a paper bag, and left the house. You knew Mr. Nishino would head to the nearby bus stop after club activities and ride the bus back home...am I wrong in any way up till this point?”

Kosuga Nao opened her mouth wide. It seemed everything fit.

“...You crashed into the bicycle in front of the temple, and the bag dropped to the floor. Though the contents did not break, the packaging changed shape. The decorations near the knot were probably damaged...an artificial flower or something similar. You needed a string to fasten it.”

“Eh? A string?”

I inadvertently interrupted. Shinokawa opened her eyes, and drew a paperback from the pile of books. It was the book *Sanctuary* by William Faulkner¹⁵ and printed by Shincho Paperback. She flipped through to one of the pages, and raised a maroon cord from inside.

Ah, I couldn't help but exclaim—now I understood.

"All the books from Shincho Paperback have this book cord...of this yarn-like texture. In the past, most printing companies had this, but only Shinchō Paperback does nowadays. *Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen* has a similar deep red book cord, and you stole the book for this."

"...Wh-where did you see it?" Kosuga Nao muttered.

"I didn't."

"Then how did you even know the color of the ribbon...I should be the only one who knows what's inside that bag. Even Nishino didn't see it."

"I can guess the color of the ribbon because you used this book cord. The paper bag was maroon, too, so I wondered if the wrapping inside was of the same color...also, the book cord in a paperback isn't very long. There are only a few things it could possibly repair."

Shinokawa closed the *Sanctuary* book and put it back into the pile of books beside her table.

"At first, you must have thought of using your hand to tear the book cord, but the cord was not as easy to remove as you thought. You had no choice, but to borrow a pair of scissors from a man passing by. You then removed the book cord...the book was useless at that point, but you didn't throw it away immediately because the man was still there. You decided to give the present first, and you brought the book along with you to the bus stop..."

She hesitated for a moment.

“...In the end, you were unable to give the present. You left the bus stop, forgetting you still had the book.... Am I wrong anywhere up till this point?”

Kosuga Nao knelt down in a sudden, deflated manner. For a while, everyone remained silent.

“...You even knew about that?”

She buried her head into her knees and muttered weakly.

“By any chance, do you...know why I didn’t return the book?”

“I’m not too certain...you didn’t do anything to the book after you took it back, and you thought of returning it, but you aren’t explaining why you don’t have it. Looking at these few points...”

Shinokawa’s voice grew softer and gentler.

“...Are you now reading this book?”

The girl lifted her head, her ears slightly red. Then, she seeming to regret it, she looked away from the hospital bed.

“I didn’t intend to read it in the first place. I don’t like books...but it just happened to drop open right in front of my eyes...”

“...It opened to the page with the *Monument Gleaning* story, right?”

Shinokawa finished for her. So that’s how it was, I thought to myself. This was Shida’s favourite story, and he probably would have marked the page it started on.

“That story has a part where a girl in her teens gives a present to a man on his birthday.”

I managed to digest a little of what was going on. Kosuga Nao was of a similar age to the girl in the story, and once she read the scene where the girl gives a birthday present, she had the enthusiasm to read on.

Kosuga Nao continued to kneel, her hands pressed to her chin, her ferocious expression becoming gentler, and her face showing some

signs of immaturity.

“I don’t know whether I like him or not, I just found him special.... That’s why I wanted to give him a present. I didn’t know he hated me. Well, I guess I wasted my time and effort there.”

Her voice was extremely cheery, and I couldn’t tell whether she was forcing herself or truly feeling relieved.

“That story was just plain wish fulfillment for me. At first, I wondered how there could be a girl like that, but maybe the writer knew it was a wild wish. I realized that, and it’s a good story...I thought I would continue to read the other stories in this book.”

She put her hands on her jean covered knees. The age, sex and circumstance were different, but maybe those that like similar books have similar senses.

“...I apologize for stealing the book and cutting the cord,” she said.

“If you don’t mind the cut cord, I’ll definitely return the book tomorrow. There’s still a little bit I want to finish reading...”

“That won’t do.”

Shinokawa interrupted the girl’s words in a quiet tone and spoke to the startled girl.

“You have to return the book to its owner, not to us. The owner of the book is Mr. Shida, and he likes the *Monument Gleaning* story, just like you. If you apologize sincerely, I’m sure he’ll forgive you.”

I finally realized, Shinokawa had always intended to make the girl apologize directly to Shida from the moment she called her here. This was a better solution than us giving the book back, and I guessed Shida would definitely be happy.

“...I understand. I’ll do that.”

Kosuga Nao nodded without hesitation.

One morning a few days later, I brought Kosuga Nao to the coast near Kugenuma station. Cars full of foreign tourists crowded the

coastal road and traffic barely moved. The sound of waves breaking could be heard from afar, accompanied by the sight of windsurfer's sails gliding along the rippling waves.

I should have noticed the moment we proposed Kosuga Nao return the book herself that she didn't know where Shida lived. Someone had to take her there, and I was the only one who could do so.

I turned from the coastal road and into a narrow alley along Hikijigawa River. The number of pedestrians decreased drastically.

Kosuga Nao brought the book along as requested—no, I hadn't seen it personally, but she was holding a slightly large paper bag. Of course, we did notify Shida beforehand, and he said he would be waiting for us at his lair.

She hardly spoke at all as we went on our way. I could tell she was a little tense.

“...It's around there.”

I pointed below the steel bridge. There was a structure made of plastic sheets built near the foot of the concrete base. As if proving my point, a bald middle-aged man pulled a sheet aside and walked out.

Kosuga Nao was a little taken aback by Shida's appearance, and her eyes widened slightly, but for just a moment.

“...This is enough. I'll go alone.”

She quickly went down the diagonal side of the concrete block, and I hurriedly followed her. She said it was enough for me to take her there, but I had a duty to ensure her safety. Upon noticing me, Shida took off the towel he had on around his neck. The girl stopped right in front of him and stood there.

“...I'm Kosuga.”

“I'm Shida. Good morning.”

Shida introduced himself. The girl fidgeted around clumsily, took out the book wrapped in cloth, and handed it to Shida with both hands.

“I’m returning this. I’m sorry for stealing it from you.”

Shida received the book silently, and removed the cloth as if to confirm the book’s existence. I could see the title, Koyama Kiyoshi’s *Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen*, clearly. The book was very old, and the pages looked slightly brown. Shida flipped through the pages and touched the remaining part of the book cord lightly.

“...Ah, what a pity.”

He sighed. Kosuga Nao seemed to be a little worried and lowered her head.

“I’m really sorry that I can’t do anything to fix it...”

“No, I’m not talking about the book.”

Shida shook his head.

“Eh?”

“I’m talking about you. You worked so hard for this, but your present wasn’t accepted.”

The girl went still, caught unawares by this development. I could see her expression stiffen.

“I only came here to apologize.”

She muttered softly, seemingly suppressing her feelings.

“I don’t need your sympathy...it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“No, it’s not about whether it matters or not. You’re hurt because your good intentions were trampled on...there’s nothing wrong with that. There’s no need to lie about such a thing,”

Shida said quietly. He knew how devastated she was.

“I-I’m not lying...”

“You don’t have to be so defensive, there’s nobody related to your usual life with you here, right?...if you can, how about you try telling me what happened?”

Nao Kosuga gritted her teeth, and her shoulders shuddered.

“There’s no point in talking about it...isn’t it a waste of effort?”

“Well, I guess it may be a waste of effort,” said Shida, nodding. “But if you just share what happened with others, you might feel somewhat relieved...you see, *Monument Gleaning*’s the same, right? There’s a line in the story, ‘Whether it is useful or not, how great it can be if we could become people who are there for each other.’ These words may seem a little cheesy, but they can etch themselves deeply into people’s hearts. If there’s anything bothering you, I’m here to listen.”

The girl suddenly shut her eyes tightly and opened her mouth. I thought she was about to shout, and got ready to move, but an unexpected thing happened.

Tears trickled down her face. She did not make a single sound. Just silent tears.

During that short moment, none of us spoke up. I could vaguely hear the sound of waves from afar.

After a while, Shida said to me, “You can head back now. This is a conversation between the two of us now.”

”Huh?”

My eyes widened. Was it fine to leave these two here—no, I didn’t think Shida would do anything to this girl, but would it be okay to leave a crying high school girl like this?

”I can’t...”

Shida looked surprised. “You’re an outsider, right? I’ll pay you back for helping me find this book sometime soon,” he said.

He then turned to ask Kosuga Nao. “What do you think? Do you

want this guy to be here?”

She shook her head without hesitation, and nasally said, “...Go head back, then.”

Since both of them agreed, I had no choice. I left the riverside while feeling a little left behind.

The following days passed peacefully.

I still didn’t know what had happened between Shida and Kosuga. When I reported the outcome to Shinokawa, her only response was, “I see,” and she seemed to lose interest in the case after that. Well, we really were just outsiders, like Shida said. There was no reason for us to delve any further into this.

However, a week later, I heard something concerning from Kasai when he visited the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. He said said that he could not find Shida under the bridge at Kugenuma Beach.

“His luggage is still there, but his bicycle isn’t. I think he’s been gone for days...and I’m a little worried,” Kasai said gloomily. It would be good if there were any support facilities nearby, but there was the possibility he had gotten himself into an accident, or something similar.

Perhaps it would be better to ask Shinokawa? Or should I send an email to Kosuga Nao first? I thought about this as I worked, but just when it was approaching evening, Shida himself appeared in the shop.

“Yo, long time no see. Are you working hard?”

He approached the counter happily. His face was tanned and his bald head showed vague signs of greying hair. His clothes were a lot dirtier than the last time I’d seen him. He looked like he’d just survived some great ordeal.

“I caused you trouble before because of this book,” he said as he drew a covered paperback from his bag made from picnic sheets, showing me the title. It was Koyama Kiyoshi’s ***Monument Gleaning +***

Saint Andersen.

“After you left, we talked at the riverside for quite a while. We had a pretty lively discussion about Koyama Kiyoshi...she’s a little aloof, but a good kid,” he said graciously. Seeming to have remembered something, he drew a paper pouch from his bag. The pouch was likely a gift, judging by the pretty ribbon tied to it.

“She even gave me this, saying it’s repayment for cutting off the book cord...look inside.”

The bag still had ample space even with a book inside. I supposed there was a present inside. The bag had signs of being opened before. Doubtfully, I opened the paper bag and was immediately startled. Packed inside was a small nail clipper and a metal ear pick.

“It’s like she heard my heart, didn’t she? This might be the most valuable present I could get, right?”

Shida said smiling. I understood what he meant. It was the same gift the young girl in *Monument Gleaning* gave the protagonist. On a closer look, I found that Shida’s nails were neatly cut. It seemed he immediately used the gift after receiving it.

“I managed to get my book back thanks to the shop owner here. That kid even said...your boss managed to figure everything out even despite being stuck in hospital the entire time.”

He then hesitated a little before saying, “...It was scary how correct she was.”

I was a little unhappy. Shinokawa was the one who figured it out, but I thought I put in some effort too.

“Anyway, I didn’t expect to get my book back so quickly. I have to give something to this shop in return at least...this will be it.”

Shida put the nail clipper and ear pick back in the pouch, and handed me a paperback. It was not Koyama Kiyoshi’s book, and it was probably a little newer, though not recent. The title read Peter Dickinson’s *Walking Dead*¹⁶, and it was printed by Sanrio SF

Paperback. I had never heard of the book before, but I guessed it was probably a Sci-Fi novel.

“What’s this?”

“You still need to ask, you idiot!? Of course I came here to sell it!” Shida exclaimed loudly. “Name any price. I’ll sell it even if you say 1 Yen.”

I looked down at *Walking Dead*. The book was very thin, and looked cheap. The given price was 480 Yen. It did not seem to be a book Shida was proud of, but anyway, I would bring it over to Shinokawa for her to have a look.

“Where’ve you been the past few days?”

“Well, you know, I had some work to do. I looked all over and finally found this book...at least give me thank you or something.”

Why was it that I had to be the one thanking him? Didn’t he bring this book as a gift to us?

“...Thank you very much.”

Anyway, I lowered my head. I was really an idiot for worrying about him.

After closing the shop, I made a trip down to the hospital. The sun was setting, and Shinokawa, who was using her laptop in the ward room, greeted me clumsily.

“Th-thank you...”

After saying that, she went silent again. I had been working at this shop for more than a while, and we hardly talked about anything other than books.

“...Thank you.”

We then went silent. Even though we met often, it would be pointless not to say anything. I decided to talk about something random for the time being.

“Shinokawa, how’s your injury?”

“...Injury?”

“Didn’t you say you went to the rehab room?”

“Ah, yeah...I guess I did...I’ve been rehabilitating,” she answered with a soft voice.

“Speaking of which, how did you injure yourself? I never asked.”

It seemed she had a corset on her waist, but her leg wasn’t in a cast. Before, I heard she’d injured her leg; had she recovered?

“...”

She fidgeted around, wondering what to say, and finally said nothing. I was a little disappointed. I had hoped to use this as a chance to improve our relationship, but we couldn’t even have a casual chat...

“Er-erm...”

Suddenly, Shinokawa raised her voice. She seemed to be taken aback by her own voice as she cringed a little.

“I-I’m not good at talking about anything other than books...b-but I find it easier to talk to you, compared to other people...”

I couldn’t help but wonder. She said she found it easier to talk to me and *still* had a hard time communicating... just how bad was she with everyone else?

“Erm...you won’t resign from the shop, right?”

“Eh?”

“I get along with you easily at work, Mr. Goura... so...”

I stared at her. I knew what she wanted to say. Of course, my answer would be a definite yes—she was a little eccentric, but I was very happy to hear she needed me.

“I won’t resign. I’m happy to listen to you talk about books.”

To someone like me, who can't read even though he wants to, this is the sort of perfect environment that you can't find anywhere else. I did have a few gripes about my pay though.

“Ah, yes.”

I suddenly remembered why I had come, and drew Peter Dickinson's *Walking Dead* from the bag Shida brought.

She tentatively lifted her head and looked at the book I was handing her. Her eyes behind the glasses widened suddenly. As someone had flipped a switch on her personality, her expression immediately brightened.

“Ah, it's ***Walking Dead!***”

The next moment, the book disappeared from my hands and ended up in Shinokawa's. She beamed blissfully as she examined the book from all angles. The black-clothed girl on the hard front cover continued to swivel around.

“Where did Mr Shida find this book...did he say anything about it?”

“No... is it really a rare book?”

“The Sanrio SF imprint was known for their lineup catered towards collectors. They published quite a few western science fiction and fantasy novels that Japanese readers were unfamiliar with, but ended up shutting down after about 10 years due to declining sales. There are many novels that can only be found translated under this imprint. There are still many fans to this day who try to collect everything published by Sanrio SF.

Her energy was incredible as she rattled on with her explanation.

“***Walking Dead*** is a very rare book that's still in circulation. It's uncommon in the antiquarian book market, and nobody has ever imported it.”

I finally knew why she was so excited. So, if it was so valuable,

would it sell for the same amount as the other paperbacks Shida brought in?

“How much can this book sell for?”

“Well...the top, bottom and edges aren’t darkened, and the cover is very pretty...it can probably sell for more than 50,000 Yen...”

I was speechless. For this one book? I never thought it could be worth this much. Shida even said he would sell this valuable book for ‘1 Yen’—this would be an ample show of gratitude for an antiquarian bookshop like ours. He probably spent quite a lot of effort getting this book.

“Did Mr. Shida mention anything about Miss Kosuga?”

“Well, it seems they had quite the lively chat about Koyama Kiyoshi.”

Shida had looked really delighted when he showed me the dazzling nail clipper and ear pick he had received. Perhaps it was because he met someone who shared his interests.

“Mr. Shida accepted her present. It was—”

“A nail clipper and an ear pick, right?”

She immediately filled in. I, who was about to continue on in a satisfied manner, was shocked by her response.

“Eh, how did you...”

I realized the answer as I was speaking and stopped my question midway through. When Shinokawa spoke with Kosuga Nao, she told Kosuga that Shida liked *Monument Gleaning* too, and even told her to apologize with their connection in mind.

I thought about what had happened, perhaps she had hinted for Kosuga Nao to give this very gift. She probably knew that Shida would be delighted and forgive Kosuga.

I stared at Shinokawa’s innocent expression and recalled the words Shida had said as he left the shop.

“I caused you some trouble here, and I really want to thank you, but...”

Shida had been at a loss of words, his face showing a serious expression.

“That shop owner of yours is so amazing, it worries me. Being too intelligent can cause trouble too. I don’t think she’s realized this though, so you need to take note of this, you know?”

At that time, I thought he was simply worrying too much. Shinokawa was only interested in books, how could she cause any trouble?

I hadn’t changed my mind or anything—but I was a little concerned about the nail clipper and ear pick. I knew she wasn’t acting out of malice, but I couldn’t honestly say she was innocent of manipulating anyone. If she ever realized the truth, she probably wouldn’t be so happy about how things turned out.

Maybe I just had to pay a little more attention. It would be fine as long as I continued working with her.

Shinokawa, who was flipping through the pages, opened her mouth and let out a hoarse sound.

It seemed she was whistling, or at least attempting to do so, without realizing it.

CHAPTER 3

VINOGRADOV/KUZMIN'S INTRODUCTION TO LOGIC (AOKI PUBLISHING)



Chapter 3
Vinogradov/Kuzmin "Introduction to Logic" (Aoki Paperback)

There was no response when I knocked, so I opened the door and entered the room.

The setting sun shined into the room through the window, and for an instant, I was unable to see the bed as it was partially covered behind increasingly tall stacks of old books. The patient—my employer, Shinokawa Shioriko, was nowhere to be seen.

She was probably doing her rehabilitation and normally wasn't around this time of day. She must have been in a hurry when she went out, because her laptop was left open near the side of her bed. Though this was a hospital, it was too careless of her. There was a safe on the rack beside the bed, but she didn't seem to have any intention of using it.

I ducked through the doorway and entered the room. Recently, it had become a daily routine for me to watch the shop starting in the morning and bring the books the customers left with me to this place in the evening. She would appraise and value the books, I would bring the books back to the shop, negotiate with the customers. If the customers agreed to our purchase price, I would then keep the books in the shop—my job was simply a repeat of the same motions.

“He...hello...”

I turned around at the faint voice. I saw a woman in a wheelchair wearing blue pajamas and a cardigan just outside the open door. She had long black hair and thick-framed glasses. She seemed to be at a loss for what to and was fidgeting nervously with her head down.

“Ah, hello.”

I hurriedly moved aside and let the wheelchair into the room. The middle-aged nurse pushing the wheelchair in frowned as she tried to avoid the obstacles while moving towards the bed. Despite how careful she was being, one of the wheels ended up bumping into a stack of books. The tower of books from the Japanese Ideology

series |1| shook precariously and nearly collapsed.

“Ah!”

The two women called out at the same time; Shinokawa hastily checked the books, while the nurse checked the wheelchair.

“...I did mention it before, but please reduce the number of books here.”

The nurse sternly her as she helped Shinokawa from the wheelchair to the bed. It seemed it wasn’t the first time this had happened, but I guess that was to be expected.

“...Ye-yes. I’m sorry, I’ll be careful...”

Shinokawa lowered her head earnestly on the bed—but it was doubtful if she would actually change anything. Though she was beautiful, she was an incorrigibly hopeless bookworm and reading was as important as breathing to her. If all the earlier warnings didn’t do anything, what could possibly change now?

“You should pay attention to this too!”

The nurse suddenly directed her complaint towards me. I was leisurely listening to their conversation, but unwittingly straightened my back when she addressed me.

“...Me?”

“Right! Please do not bring any books when you visit next time. You can’t pamper her so much, even if she is your girlfriend!”

“Err...”

I was speechless. The nurse folded the wheelchair and placed it as close to the bedside as she could before giving us a glance and walking out the room. An awkward atmosphere hung in the air.

“...That probably bothers you.”

The ambiguous line broke this silence.

Of course, we weren’t lovers—but the relationship between us was

not simply that of a shop owner and employee. She, who couldn't talk to other people about books even though she wanted to, could tell me about them to her heart's content. I, who couldn't read even though I wanted to, would listen to her as much as I wanted. It was a relationship where we supported each other, in a sense.

“Y-yeah...it—it does bother me.”

Shinokawa squeezed out a voice from atop the bed. Her ears were completely red.

“...It—it must have bothered you...that she said I-I-I’m your girl-girlfriend, Mr. Goura.”

“No, no, no! That isn’t it!”

My denial was in a great fluster and I tried to continue.

“I’m just saying it bothers me that I was misunderstood! Not because of that! That doesn’t bother me at all. Rather, I’d say it makes me really happy.”

I immediately closed my mouth. That was really an ambiguous line; it might have sounded like I was confessing to her.

“Ah...I was also...thinking the same.”

I had the urge to ask her what exactly she was agreeing with. Was she troubled that we were misunderstood? Or was it that she was also very happy? However, I missed the chance to ask while I was trying to choose my words.

“How—how is your rehab? Can you walk now?”

I ended up asking something completely unrelated and changed the subject.

“...Ye...yes. I can walk...bit...with support...”

“Do you know when you’ll be discharged?”

“Not yet...next month perhaps?”

“I see.”

Although this conversation might have seemed bland to any bystander, it could be considered a solid improvement when compared to before. Shinokawa was inept at talking about anything other than books, after all.

I suppose it was time to get down to business. I sat on the round chair, took out a pocket book from a paper bag, and gave it to her to inspect.

“...Could you appraise this book please?”

Vinogradov Kuzmin’s *Introduction to Logic*. It was a rather old book and did not seem to be in good condition. The cover trims and the edges were tattered.

“Ah, it’s from Aoki Publishing!”

Regardless, she accepted the book from me with a smile on her face. It was like she had changed completely compared to how she usually was. She stroked the cover slowly almost as if she was petting a puppy.

“I haven’t seen this book in so long! This book is no longer in print and the publisher isn’t around anymore either.”

This was actually the first time I heard of Aoki Publishing. This book was probably limited in print.

“Is it worth a lot?”

“No...not at all.”

She regretfully shook her head.

“Eh? But it is a rare book, right?”

“It’s a good book, but there just isn’t any demand for it in the antiquarian book market. Since the book’s condition isn’t too great, it’s only worth about 500 yen.

My eyes went wide. This was nothing like the Sanrio SF the book hunter Shida brought before.

“Aoki Publishing was a press that was active for about 30 years from when it started operations in the fifties. Most of the ideology books and old communist literature from that period were printed by Aoki Publishing. This book, *Introduction to Logic*, is as its name implies, an explanation of logic. There have been many reprints, and it has always been popular. What was that person who brought it in like?”

“Hm, he was in his late 50’s, dressed in a suit...”

I paused for a moment. Regarding my memory of that customer, there were a few points that couldn’t be explained with just a few mere sentences.

“...What is it?”

“Actually, there’s something I want to talk to you about. That customer was a little weird...”

“Weird? How so?”

She tilted her head doubtfully.

“Yeah. It’s a long story...”

September had just begun, but that man was neatly dressed in a suit, and his tie was fastened all the way to his neck. His hair was combed neatly, and his moustache was cleanly shaved, giving the impression of a bank’s branch manager. However, he wore a dark pair of sunglasses and looked somewhat conspicuous.

The man walked into the shop, and went straight for the counter without looking around. He was tall and lanky, and his skin was of a healthy tan.

“I would like to sell a book.”

He enunciated each word clearly with a deep voice, and left the *Introduction to Logic* on the counter. My impression of a bank employee changed slightly in my mind. Perhaps he was a veteran broadcaster, or maybe a commentator.

“The one in charge of appraisal isn’t around. Would you mind leaving the book here for today?”

I managed to explain matters to him properly, at the very least. I was somewhat used to the process of welcoming customers in this Antiquarian Bookshop after three weeks of working here.

“Sure.”

“Thank you very much. Please write down your name and address here.”

I placed a sales invoice slip and a ball-point pen on the table, and pointed my finger at the name and address column. The man took off his sunglasses, fished out a pen, and started to write. His name was Sakaguchi Masashi, birthday October 2nd 1950, and lived in Zushi City, right next to Kamakura.

His handwriting was not exceptionally pretty, especially in contrast to his neat attire. Perhaps he wanted to write neatly, but he ended up writing outside of the boxes.

Unwittingly, I noticed an obvious scar at the corner of Sakauguchi’s eye. Perhaps the sunglasses were meant to hide this wound.

It didn’t seem to be an injury he received recently, and it made his stern expression terrifying. This truly gave a completely different impression to me now. This man was dressed in a neat suit, had an abnormally deep voice and a scar on his face—combining these factors together, I could not tell what kind of work he did or even what kind of person he was. He simply wrote *company employee* on the invoice slip’s occupation column.

“This should be enough, right?”

“The price doesn’t matter. If it can’t sell, I’ll take it back.”

“I understand.”

“I will come by again tomorrow afternoon, and I hope the

appraisal will be completed by then. If there are any changes to this appointment, please contact me anytime. That is all from me. Is there anything else you need?”

There was nothing I wanted to add, but it made me little uneasy.

“No, nothing in particular.”

“I see. I will leave it to you then.”

Sakaguchi put his sunglasses back on and left the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia the same way he walked in.

“...He seemed to be a neat sort of person.”

The moment I finished what I wanted to say, Shinokawa spoke.

“Yeah. Maybe he’s neat but he felt a little unnatural...well, he just felt a little too neat.”

I was not insinuating that Sakaguchi’s actions were weird, but I was very concerned that he immediately answered without hesitation. It seemed like he had already decided on how to answer, as if he had already considered all the possible conversations. Perhaps he really was just extremely neat.

“Is there another reason why you find him a little weird, Mr. Goura?”

I was a little surprised by her question—this person was really intuitive.

“Yeah, there’s still a second part to this,” I continued. Right, this would be where the problem began. “An hour after Sakaguchi left...”

It was about 2 pm later that day and I was having a conversation with the book hunter Kasai at the bookshop. It seemed he had received an order for antiquarian books through the internet, and did not know how to deal with this since he did not have the relevant knowledge. He asked Shida for help, and later thought of getting Biblia to help out as well. He was, of course, willing to pay

for the help.

The phone in the shop rang just as I was thinking Kasai's idea didn't sound too bad.

"Thank you for your patronage. This is the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia..."

I picked up the receiver, and was about to introduce myself when the high-pitched voice on the other end caused my ears to ring.

"Hello, is this the Antiquarian Bookshop? You purchase books here? Did a man called Sakaguchi go over to sell a paperback? He's a tall, gloomy looking, a stiff-voiced old man. His last name is written with the characters for slope and mouth..."

At this moment, I recovered from my startled state.

"Might I ask who you are?"

"I'm Sakaguchi's wife...to be honest, it's a little awkward to say this so formally. Oohooohoo, honestly!"

There was some laughter in the voice for some reason. Just how cheerful was she? The man who called himself Sakaguchi was acting odd, but this woman claiming to be his wife was acting weirder. Was she really his wife in the first place? Was it really alright to tell her that Sakaguchi came by?

"So what is it? Did he come over?"

I frowned and thought to myself. She knew Sakaguchi's name and that he came here to sell a paperback. Maybe she was really his wife and there was an emergency.

"...Yes, he did drop by."

"Is that so? Has the book been sold yet? Did anyone else buy it by any chance?"

"No. He simply left the book with us. The person in charge of appraising it will look at it later."

“When is that going to happen?”

“This evening...”

“Then my husband will stop by the store again. Will that be today? Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Understood! Thank you very much! What’s your name?”

“Goura.”

“Mr. Goura? Then, I’ll contact you again, Mr. Goura.”

“Eh?”

I inadvertently asked. What did she mean by that? But she had already hung up.

“...She seems like a very lively person,” said Shinokawa cautiously.

She certainly was lively, or more accurately, strangely upbeat.

“What do you think? Something happened between this couple, right?”

She placed a fist at her lips, and pondered for a while. Suddenly, she asked, “Did Mr. Sakaguchi’s wife drop by at the shop after hanging up?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Didn’t she say she would contact you later? I think she wanted come over to the shop.”

“Eh?”

Upon hearing her say this, I realized that could have been what she meant. She had even asked for my name during the call.

“But what would she want to do at our shop?”

“She wanted to get the book back before it’s sold, I guess...thus, she asked when we would be appraising the book, and when her husband stopped by the shop.”

“Ah...”

I see. After thinking about it, I could understand why she bombarded me with a one-sided barrage of questions—I was not certain, but this would at least explain things.

“Then, is that his wife’s book?”

“Why do you think so?”

“She wants to prevent the book from being sold, right? Maybe it’s her own book that’s going to be sold or something...”

“I don’t think that’s the case,” said Shinokawa, shaking her head. “If that were true, she would have explained matters to you in the first place, Mr. Goura...she’s not the type who can control her emotions, right?”

“...Is that so?”

She hadn’t seemed angry at her husband at all. Or rather, she laughed when she mentioned that she was his wife. If the book was something her husband sold without her consent, she would have added one or two begrudging words.

“So in that case, Sakaguchi wanted to sell his own book, and his wife wanted to stop him?”

“Yes, that’s how it is.”

Shinokawa showed me the cover of *Introduction to Logic*. There was a large blue half-crescent stamp under the title. The cover was very plain, and I supposed the old books were all like this.

“This book must have contained some secret.”

She started flipping through the pages as she said so, and I probed my body forward as well. Unlike *Sōseki’s Complete Collection*, there was no signature here, and there were no markings on any pages. It seemed the book was in poor condition due to constant reading, not because it was handled carelessly.

“Then, what sort of logic does this book talk about?”

I asked. It was the most basic of questions, but Shinokawa didn't mind.

“This book introduces syllogism. Hm... a simple example would be, A equals B, B equals C; therefore, A equals C. Things like that...”

I searched through my memory. I had heard of this before.

“...Deductive reasoning?”

“Yes. This type of logic, if explained through mathematical symbols, would be called syllogism. This book was a textbook used by schools in Russia—the Soviet Union back then, and afterwards the book was translated into Japanese. Naturally, the contents consist of an introduction to symbolic logic, and the common questions used inside are very interesting, mostly about the *proletariat*^[2] and the *kolkhoz*^[3]. It often includes quotes from Stalin.”

Upon hearing Shinokawa's explanation, I inadvertently thought of the man called Sakaguchi. I suppose the precise way he chose his words could be explained by his fondness of such books.

“...This is the first edition.”

Shinokawa said so after flipping over to the publisher's note. I leaned over to look, and found it was the first edition released on July 1st, 1955.

“It seemed Sakaguchi Masashi did not buy this from a retail bookshop.”

“What makes you say that?”

Shinokawa pulled out the invoice slip I placed in the book, and showed me the birthday column. Sakaguchi Masashi, born on October 2nd, 1950—I see. He would be 5 years old at the time the first edition was published. This was not a book a kindergartener would buy.

“Did he buy it at a secondhand bookstore?”

“Or maybe someone gave it to him as a present...ah!”

Shinokawa suddenly cried out, and covered her mouth, evidently surprised by her outcry. It was rare of her to call out like this.

“...Ah, sorry.”

Her stare was fixated on the last page of *Introduction to Logic*. A label-like item was stuck deliberately on the new edition introduction. There was a “personal reading permit”, and a few columns with the words “book name”, “owner”, “permit date”, “cell number”. *Introduction to Logic* was written on the “book title”, and the name Sakaguchi Masashi was written on the “owner” column. For some reason, there was a number 109 written above the name.

The “permit date” was October 21st, Year 47. I supposed that was the Shōwa Era rather than the Western Calendar. After that incident with *Sōseki's Complete Collection* the previous month, I memorized the method for calculating the actual year. The 47th year of the Shōwa Era would be 1972. It was currently 2010, which meant this label was most likely used 40 years ago.

“What is it?”

It did not seem to be a library card. “Personal reading” and “cell number” were unfamiliar terms to me.

Shinokawa did not answer me, and merely looked at the personal reading permit.

“Shinokawa?” I raised my voice slightly, and she finally answered.

“...I do occasionally see this since I manage old books.”

She seemed to have difficulty articulating as she stammered.

“The books a prison library lends to its inmates are called official's books, while the books belonging to the inmates are called *personal books*...this is a permit pasted on a personal book.”

I silently looked down at the personal reading permit. After a while, I finally understood what Shinokawa meant. This permit had

Sakaguchi's name on it. in other words—

“That man went to jail?”

“...Most likely. This 109 is probably his prisoner's number.”

“How did...”

He was eccentric, but he did not seem like the kind who would commit a crime. I'd never met anyone with a record before, however.

“...Do you want to check if he really served time?”

“Eh? We can?”

“Since we have a clue, we might be able to.”

Shinokawa pulled the laptop on the side table close to her, and activated it for me to see. I was hoping for a cute wallpaper, but an image of a book cover appeared instead, which made me a little disappointed. The book name was *The Late Years*; she certainly liked to read, and I was impressed, rather than surprised by this.

“E-erm, about this...please don't look...”

Her face was bright red as she opened the browser with a click. The side of the notepad computer has a mobile internet dongle to allow her to access the web from the hospital room. She accessed the database of a big news firm and quickly entered the name “Sakaguchi Masashi” in the search column.

“Ah.”

I understood her intention. If Sakaguchi Masashi had committed an offence, it might appear on the newspapers. I never thought of using such a method to investigate—I stared at the page, and looked through the search results with bated breath. There were a few large reports, all linking to the same incident. January 9th, 1971, a year before the permit was issued.

Robbery at Hodogaya Bank/Chase footage in the day.

There was a robbery at the Hodogaya Branch of the Yokohama City's Sagamino bank on the afternoon of 8th January. A young man broke into the bank with a hunting rifle, stole 400,000 Yen in cash, and escaped on a passenger car parked outside. The police cars arrived at the scene pursued the suspect, and stopped and arrested the suspect at a civilian's residence 1km away, where he had crashed. The suspect, an ex-worker living nearby named Sakaguchi Masashi (20 years old), is now undergoing police investigations.

I was shocked speechless. That man, who looked like a bank employee, was actually a criminal in a bank robbery—it was really unbelievable, but this certainly was the case. The age matched completely, and there was an additional report.

Sakaguchi's face was slightly injured when he crashed into the civilian residence wall, and he is currently undergoing treatment at the hospital. The police has revealed that this incident isn't affecting the investigation proceedings.

I recalled the wound at the corner of Sakaguchi's eye. It must have been the injury he got back then.

“That guy...really has a record?”

“...Yes,” said Shinokawa, nodding. She looked very serious. “But after this incident, there was no mention of the name Sakaguchi Masashi in the news...this was the only crime he committed. He must have turned a new leaf since then.”

I agreed, but I was a little concerned that he really might not have changed his ways. Either way, I would be the one dealing with him tomorrow.

“What do I do with this book?”

“We should buy it like we always do. Please tell him this book can be sold for 100 Yen.”

It was certainly an appraisal as usual. As she said, no matter who the customer is, it would be expected of us to carry out deals

normally—but it would be a lie to say that we weren't a little worried.

“But there's something I'm concerned about,” she said as she closed the laptop, and turned herself towards me.

“What is it?”

“Why does Sakaguchi want to sell the book, and why does his wife want to prevent him from selling it?”

“Eh? Isn't it because he doesn't need it anymore?”

“But this is a book he had with him for 40 years, right? He said the price doesn't matter, so it doesn't seem to be a matter of money. It's improbable that he doesn't have a place to leave this book...why must he sell it?”

I folded my arms. It was true there would have to be a reason to sell a book Sakaguchi kept with him for a long time. Maybe it had something to do with the call his wife made.

At this moment, tapping footsteps rang outside the quiet ward room. We looked back, and saw the door swing open. A petite woman entered.

“Hello! Is this the shop owner's room?”

A shrill voice shook my head as it echoed within. She was dressed in a red one-piece, and the ends of her brown hair were curled up. She had double eyelids, a round face, and looked just like a child, but there were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and lips. She was most likely in her late thirties, and the thick make-up made contours on her flat face.

The long gloves used to block off the sunlight felt different however as they were plain in contrast to the rest of her clothing. There was no doubt, however I looked at her, that she was a hostess preparing to go to work.

She narrowed her eyes and looked around.

“There’re a lot of books. This is the first time I’ve seen so many. Is the bespectacled beauty the owner? It’s already the beginning of September, but it’s so hot today. I walked over from Ofuna Station; it’s really hot out there...ah, sorry. I started talking so much without introducing myself.”

I knew who she was even without her introduction. She formally lowered her head.

“I’m the wife of Sakaguchi Masashi, Shinobu. Please return that book to me!”

Sakaguchi Shinobu smiled as she pulled a round chair over and sat down. There was no pause during this time, and she continued to rattle on. Her face was not notably attractive, but she had all sorts of expressions and made you feel like you knew her.

“I went to the shop in Kita-Kamakura before this, and the high school student working there told me the one who knows how to help went off to the hospital, so I took the bus here...ah, goodness me. I came to the hospital empty-handed! I’m really sorry, miss owner.”

Shinokawa immediately blushed the moment she was mentioned.

“It-it’s nothing, you don’t have to...erm, I’m Shinokawa...nice to meet you...”

She stammered, and she adjusted her body’s position slightly, apparently wanting to hide behind me. Either way, this person would not relax until we start talking about books. I coughed.

“May I ask, what do you mean about hoping that we return the book?”

“A-are you Mr. Goura? The one who picked up the phone? You’re really tall, taller than my Masa... ah, no, taller than my husband.”

I suppose this Masa was a nickname for Sakaguchi Masashi—for the time being, I did not want to think of this unfitting name.

“Your husband wants to sell the book to us, right?”

“Yes, but there’s definitely a problem! He suddenly said he wanted to sell a book he always treasured, and wouldn’t tell me the reason no matter what. I told him not to sell it, but he wouldn’t listen...I thought I should come here since I want the book back. Well, that man’s rather stiff when he speaks, right?”

“Hm? ...well, a little...”

The topic changed suddenly, and it was a little tedious to catch up with her words.

“Supposedly it’s because of this *Introduction to Logic* book. He was a very ridiculous man when he was young, and when he was practicing at a monastery, his high school teacher gave him this book, telling him that he could talk with others logically if he read it a few times. It was an amazing book that changed his personality.”

At that moment, Shinokawa and I glanced at each other—monastery?

“...Well, what was going on at the monastery?”

“Ah, sorry. Our house’s man left home when he was 20 years old, and seemed to have spent his time at some monastery for around 5 years. He wasn’t planning on becoming a monk, but it seemed he had to go there because something happened.”

I tried my best to maintain a look of admiration. It seemed this person did not know anything about Sakaguchi’s criminal past, and even talked about some monastery practice.

“Anyway, he said it was a really tough place, with a wall so high he couldn’t get over, and he could only meet visitors for a short while. After he finished his training, he was shocked by how greatly the outside world had changed.”

Wouldn’t that mean our guess is correct here? I thought involuntarily. Even after listening to this part, she still did not realize that he was talking about prison; she really has a trusting

personality—

No, that was not all. She really had trusted her husband deep down.

“Anyway, I just think it’s better not to sell it, I know he’ll regret it. ...erm, is that book over there his? Is it possible for me to take it back if you haven’t paid?”

Sakaguchi Shinobu straightened her back and pointed at the *Introduction to Logic* on Shinokawa’s thighs. She looked ready to snatch it away immediately, and I hesitated on whether I should stop her.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t hand it over.”

Shinokawa said decisively. She has stopped hiding behind me at some point and was staring right at Shinobu. This was what she was like whenever she talked about books.

Shinobu’s eyes went wide at the abject refusal.

“Eh? What’s the matter? Why not?”

“Your husband’s the owner of this book, and your husband hopes to sell it...as someone who trades old books, I can’t ignore the wishes of the customers. If you want to stop your husband from selling it, please convince him, and not us.”

Shinokawa held onto the book tightly as she looked down deeply. Sakaguchi Shinobu seemed to have lost her strength as she leaned forward. She suddenly became silent, and soon, smiled weakly at Shinokawa.

“Hm, that’s true...it’s as you say, shopkeeper. I don’t think things through, and I was being unreasonable...sorry.”

She then sighed and narrowed her eyes at the ceiling.

“But why does he want to sell it? It’s so strange. He won’t tell me himself and I don’t think there’s anyone else that would know.”

That would be too much to expect. If his family members didn’t know, how could anyone else understand what he was thinking—

no, there would be someone who would know. I turned to look at Shinokawa; she was someone who was good at solving mysteries like this.

“...You have quite the nice relationship with your husband.” Shinokawa said.

Shinobu grinned and nodded fiercely.

“You’re right! We do! We got married 20 years ago, but we’re still very much in love even now.”

It was clear their relationship was good if she should declare her love like that. Shinokawa too seemed to be affected by her as she smiled.

“How did you first meet your husband?”

I knew she wanted to obtain more information. Shinobu’s expression changed and she leaned forward towards us.

“It will take a long time for me to explain this. Is that alright?”

We nodded silently and she began her story without any hesitation.

“I first met him the year after I graduated high school...

“At that time, I was working at a hostess...ah, I’m helping out at a friend’s snack bar now. I’m dressed up like this because I have to get to work later.

“You see, I didn’t really get along with my parents who were both very intelligent and graduated from good universities. I was totally inept at schoolwork, so I was scolded ever since I was young for being dumb. It would be one thing if I’d even liked learning, but I really hated it.

“That’s why I immediately left home once I graduated from high school. At first, I was a clerk at an ordinary company, but I couldn’t understand anything, and I was of no use at all. They fired me half a year later.

“I tried all sorts of part-time jobs for a living after that, but they all kept getting mad at me. I figured there had to be a job I was suited for, so I tried working at a cabaret club.

“There aren’t many of them nowadays, and they weren’t really common when I was younger either. There was an old and famous club at the west exit of Yokohama station which took me in after I interviewed with them.

“As you can see, I talk a lot now, don’t I? But back then I could talk way more. A hostess’ job was to take care of customers, but I kept talking about my own things. The customers are all adults and nobody wanted to listen to some kid who just graduated high school. I really wanted to work hard, but I just kept getting scolded. My boss told me that he would fire me if this kept up. Just when I was feeling downhearted, Masashi came to the shop alone.

“It was a hot day, but he was dressed neatly in a suit, and his back was straight. He was no different from now, and even back then you could call him old man. He was, of course, not married back then. He said that he would normally didn’t come to clubs to drink with woman, but did so that day to relieve his boredom.

“At first, I thought he was a really scary man. He would not talk about himself, and his method of speaking was rather stiff. He was just like my father, and I thought he was a graduate from some good university, and working at some bank. As I thought about that, I tensed up...we didn’t say anything for half an hour and only drank silently.

“And then, he suddenly spoke up. ‘I’m not good at talking about myself, but I would like to hear about you. I would be willing to hear you talk about anything, whatever you say.’

“I had been told not to talk so much in the past, but this was the first time anyone had told me I could talk to my heart’s content. I was a little surprised; if he said so, there was no reason to hold back, right? So I started talking about anything I could think of, like

yesterday's dinner or the dog I raised when I was a kid.

"I gradually started talking about more depressing things as I started to feel more comfortable and told him how I almost got fired. It turned into some kind of counseling session before I even noticed. I sobbed and I talked about all the misfortunes I had in my life, how I couldn't do anything because I was too stupid, that I didn't know where and how I should live on... Now that I think about it, he was listening very intently even though I was simply complaining away.

"And then, what happened next was important! After all of my complaints, I said, 'A hostess isn't the right job for an idiot. I'm not suited as a hostess because I'm so stupid'."

"Masashi had been listening quietly all this time, but he suddenly put down his wine glass. It was so loud that it shocked me, and I thought he was angry. That was not the case however, and he looked at me with a serious expression.

"You used deductive reasoning a moment ago. That's not something dumb people can do...you are absolutely not stupid.'

"It's strange, isn't it? Even after saying it was some deductive reasoning, I understood very well that he was trying to encourage me...I felt a little moved. Nobody had ever encouraged me before.

"And then, Masashi clasped my hands tightly and said to me.

"You are a lot smarter than I was when I was your age...the fact that you're honestly earning a living with your own two hands is proof of that. You shouldn't be ashamed of yourself no matter what anyone says.'

"...When I heard that, I felt that it was the first time I could allow a man embrace me. No, or rather, I let him embrace me...and he really did. Just like that, I offered myself to him, and we got married. Ahaha, there's a huge difference in age, he's a little eccentric, and there's a lot of gossip, but I don't really mind what people say. It's been a long time since then, and we have quite the

happy life together. Masashi looks very scary, right? But he's actually really gentle. He probably went through all sorts of hardship, and I sometimes feel like it's a pity for such a rare good man to marry me!"

And after that, Sakaguchi Shinobu continued to talk about her husband's good points as she proudly raised her chest.

"How about it? He's a really good person, isn't he?"

My heart felt heavy as I listened and I started to pity Sakaguchi a little. It would have been difficult to admit that he had a criminal record to someone who trusted in him so much. I could understand why he lied and said he had been a monk.

"Has anything changed about your husband recently?"

Shinobu immediately showed a worried look when Shinokawa raised the question.

"He started acting a little strange about a month ago. He's more silent than he usually, doesn't smile as much as he used to, and doesn't meet my eyes anymore...and—and also, the sunglasses! He bought them recently and they look so garish! That's what's been weirding me out the most!"

I suppose that would be the least important thing. Shinokawa handed the cover of the *Introduction to Logic* to her for her to see.

"Has he ever let you read this book?"

"No, not at all."

She shook her head hard.

"He really treasured it, but I couldn't understand even if I wanted to....ah, but I did flip through it once when I was cleaning the house and saw it on the living room sideboard. There was some dust on the cover, and I looked through it for a bit after wiping it off a bit."

So she did try to read it before. It was clear from Shinokawa's change of expression that she had realized something. It was same

face she showed when she discovered the truth behind *Sōseki's Complete Collection*.

“...Was your husband nearby at the time?”

“Let me think...ah yeah, I think he was. I had him go out of the room so I could clean and he was listening to the radio on the veranda. He’s been doing that a lot these days...”

“Is that so...”

Shinokawa muttered softly. I felt like I could understand what Sakaguchi was thinking—the “private reading permit” label pasted in this book was a tie to his criminal past. It had the potential to tear his marriage apart in the off chance that it was discovered. It would make sense for him to want to move away from that risk as much as he could.

“Maybe you could lend me this book? I’d like to take a look at it.”

Shinobu’s words caused me to widen my eyes, and Shinokawa looked reluctant, too.

“Ah, I won’t take it home or anything. I just want to know what sort of book it is. Now that I think about it, I never read through it. A little peek should be fine, right?”

She smiled and reached her hand out innocently. Before I realized it, I spoke up.

“Well, there might be something he doesn’t want anyone to see...”

“Mr. Goura!”

Shinokawa warned me, causing me to recover. Not good, I almost said something unnecessary. But Shinokawa shook her head.

“...No, that’s not it.”

“Eh?”

Was I wrong? What did I say exactly that was wrong?

Sakaguchi had a book, *Introduction to Logic*, with the ‘private reading

permit' label that he got in prison attached to it. His wife started looking through the book recently, and he came to our shop to get rid of it. Not matter how I looked at it, it looked like he was trying to hide the fact that he had a criminal record. Did he perhaps have something else in mind?

“What is it? What’s the matter?”

Shinobu compared our expressions, and finally turned her gaze to Introduction to Logic.

“Is there something about this book?”

Shinokawa did not reply and the hospital room fell into complete silence. I was regretting my carelessness. She might realize that the cause of our uneasiness was the private reading permit if we showed her the book. On the other hand, it would be more suspicious not to let her see. What were we supposed to do here?

Then, there was a knock on the door. I sighed in relief.

“...Please come in.”

Shinokawa answered, and the ward room door opened slightly. A tall man dressed in suit and sunglasses. He was breathing heavily, obviously anxious.

“Ah, Masa!”

Shinobu happily waved to him.

Sakaguchi Masashi had arrived.

“Take a seat. Over here.”

Sakaguchi Shinobu pulled a round chair over and placed it next to her. Sakaguchi Masashi lightly sat down. They looked very intimate next to each other, and looked more like a father and his daughter who had returned home after a long time, rather than a couple.

“Why are you here, dear?”

“My plans for tomorrow changed. I called the bookshop and heard

that you went to the hospital, so I came by.”

Sakaguchi frowned as he said, and added on with an unchanging expression, “Please don’t call me Masa in front of others. I told you that before, didn’t I?”

“Ah, sorry. Erm, Masa...shi! Don’t sell the book!”

She suddenly touched upon the crux of the issue, and Masashi pursed his lips.

“Sorry, I’ve already made my decision. I want to sell the book because I don’t need it anymore.”

“Why would you say that!? Didn’t you always treasure that book that much?”

Shinobu said as she pointed at the *Introduction to Logic*.

“You even won me over with that book! Isn’t the syllogism you talked about written in it? It’s a book full of memories to me too!”

“...I’m not going to change my mind.”

“It’s the same since I felt I was being seduced! Didn’t you kiss me after you confessed!?”

Sakaguchi glanced over at us. His expression had not changed, but large drops of sweat were dripping down his neck. He was really pitiful; all because she had brought this up, even the secret happenings between husband and wife were being revealed.

“At least tell me the real reason you want to sell this book. You’ve been acting weird recently. You don’t really talk much now, you don’t seem energetic, and you’re wearing those sunglasses! Everything about you is just weird!”

It seemed she was very insistent against those sunglasses, but upon hearing her words, Sakaguchi’s stare turned away somewhat. Why did it waver? Did it waver because of the sunglasses?

“...Mr. Sakaguchi,” Shinokawa slowly said. “Everyone around you

will know before long. It's not something you can hide... *unlike a certain other thing.*"

She spoke with more emphasis at the end. It was a little weird; she was clearly hinting that there was another secret beside the fact that he had a criminal past. I suddenly recalled her saying "that's not it"—what exactly will the people around him realize?

"Hm..."

Sakaguchi's face became pale. It seemed he realized that Shinokawa was talking about his criminal past. The eyes behind the sunglasses narrowed, and he stared at us again.

"It looks like you know everything."

I just about gave up—or rather, I couldn't understand. What other secret was there other besides the incident 40 years ago? How did Shinokawa find out? I should have known everything she knew.

"I understand that you aren't good at talking about yourself," Shinobu said. "But if there's anything troubling you, please, just tell me."

Sakaguchi slowly removed his sunglasses. He stared at his wife's face for quite some time, and after that, spoke calmly with a quiet voice.

"...Even from up close, I can no longer see your face clearly. I cannot tell whether your eyes are opened or closed."

"Eh..."

His wife cried out in surprise.

"I have an eye disease. My eyeballs have accumulated excess liquid, and there's no way to treat it. The unfortunately thing is that my eyes were injured when I was young which accelerated the deterioration. I am selling that book because I can no longer read it."

Silence descended upon the room again. Sakaguchi turned

towards us.

“How did you know? I wanted to keep it all quiet.”

I wanted to know too—was there any clue in whatever we talked about? I turned and looked towards the bed. Shinokawa explained with confidence.

“...This note was the key.”

She pulled out the sales invoice from the *Introduction to Logic*. Sakaguchi leaned over to look at the tip of her hand.

“This is what you wrote in our shop, Mr. Sakaguchi. The words are outside the boxes...for someone with a meticulous personality, it was fairly odd.”

“...To think I didn’t even notice something like that...” Sakaguchi muttered in self-deprecation. “I can’t clearly see what I write anymore...you knew from that alone?”

“No. I realized it after listening to your wife tell us about you. You started listening to the radio because you have difficulty reading the newspaper, you wore sunglasses to protect your eyes from direct sunlight, and your book was covered in dust because you stopped reading it. All of it was because your eyesight was becoming worse.”

I was dumbfounded. Now that she mentioned it, that certainly did seem to be the case.

Even so, she never had a conversation with Sakaguchi before. She even knew the things he was hiding from his wife just going by the things she heard. She truly did have a terrifying intellect.

“...But, why couldn’t you tell your wife?” I asked Sakaguchi. Normally, family members would be the first to know about things like this. However, Sakaguchi suddenly lowered his eyes.

“I may lose my eyesight and will probably have to rely on others for help from now on. I’m going to leave my current company soon and there will be no chances of employment for me after this. We

may end up on hard times...and she already suffered a lot for marrying me despite our difference in age. I needed to clear my thoughts before I could tell her.”

Sakaguchi lifted his eyes and looked at my face. For the first time, I discovered he was unable to look right at me since he couldn’t see clearly.

“It is true that some things are harder to reveal to your family. There might be a lot of people who think otherwise, but I am not one of them.”

I knew he was talking about his criminal past. Sakaguchi was someone who lived with such a huge secret. Perhaps the act of being honest was something he was resistant to.

“I’m really sorry for hiding it from you all this time.”

He lowered his head towards his wife. Sakaguchi Shinobu frowned as she folded her arms. This unhappy expression did not match her too much, probably because she looked like a child. After a while, she spoke with that shrill voice from before.

“I don’t really understand, Masa.”

She called Sakaguchi by that name again, and this time, he didn’t point this out.

“...What do you not understand exactly?”

“Why do you want to sell that book?”

“Did I not say it? I can no longer read it. Books are meant for reading. I wanted to hand it over to someone else rather than throw it away...”

“Can’t I read it out loud instead?” she proclaimed matter-of-factly, and continued on as she looked at the stunned Sakaguchi.

“This is a book you really treasure, right, Masa? I’ll read it to you every day. I never recited before, so maybe my reading will be bad. Isn’t that good enough?”

She grinned widely.

“It’s fine even if you have difficulty saying it. Even if you stop being able to see, Masa, I’ll always be with you no matter what. If there’s anything you want to say to me, I’ll listen. You’ll definitely feel better that way.

Sakaguchi remained silent like a sculpture, and after a while, the edges of his lips hinted at a smile.

“...I understand. Thank you.”

He stood up, and approached Shinokawa’s bed.

“Sorry, but I don’t want to sell that book anymore. Can you please return it to me?”

Shinokawa nodded deeply, and handed Sakaguchi the *Introduction to Logic*.

“Of course. Please take it.”

With the paperback in his hands, Sakaguchi returned to his wife.

“Do you still have some time before work? I want to find some place to talk about future plans.”

“Of course,” Sakaguchi Shinobu said, as she stood up.

I was finally relieved, at least, that this incident was seemingly resolved without revealing that Sakaguchi had a criminal past. There was no doubt that Shinokawa intended to let them talk after discovering what happened to Sakaguchi’s eyes.

As for whether the past will be revealed, it would take Sakaguchi a long time to decide—

“...Actually, there is something else I want to say.”

Sakaguchi’s voice interrupted my feeling of relief. Shinobu looked up at her husband doubtfully.

“What is it?”

“I have a criminal record.”

“Eh?”

It was not Sakaguchi Shinobu, but myself and Shinokawa, who gasped. He barely managed to keep his criminal past a secret, so why was he revealing it now?

“I lied when I said I went to become a monk. When I was 20, I was fired from my job, and didn’t have any money to pay for food the next day. I thought I had to get a large amount of money so I could live without worry, no matter what. I stole a car and a hunting rifle from my friend’s house, robbed a nearby bank and, of course, got myself arrested immediately.”

He calmly explained his criminal past like a news report. Shinobu widened her mouth in shock as she stared at her husband’s face. Sakaguchi then pointed at the wound on the corner of his eye.

“This wound was caused by that incident...I apologize for hiding it from you for so long.”

Sakaguchi lowered his head deeply. I could not see his expression, but his back was obviously trembling. As I looked on, my palms were all sweaty from the tension; this was the biggest confession he had made in 20 years.

His wife took a deep breath and looked up at his face from below. She was the one to break this long silence.

“Is that it? I was wondering what it could be when you became serious all of a sudden.”

She then held her husband by the arms.

“I knew about that already.”

“Eh?”

Shinokawa and I both exclaimed again. These two were just full of surprises.

“You knew...?”

Sakaguchi eyes flicked up as he asked.

“Yes. Anyone would know, as long as they weren’t stupid.”

She gave her husband a meaningful smile.

“And I’m not stupid, right? That’s why I already knew... ah, this is syllogism, isn’t it?”

“Ah, yes...that’s right.”

The two of them looked behind, nodded at us, and then walked out of the hospital room arm in arm.

“...I’m glad I married you.”

Sakaguchi’s muttering rang in the air, and the door closed again.

The room looked exceptionally spacious after the Sakaguchi couple left, almost like a hurricane had rolled through it.

“...When did she find out?” I said. Perhaps it was when they were living together, or maybe it was by some chance. However, Shinokawa shook her head.

“No, she actually didn’t know.”

“Eh, didn’t she say she did?”

“If she really knew, she wouldn’t have talked about her husband’s past so happily. She would have been very cautious to prevent us from finding out his secret.”

I recalled Sakaguchi Shinobu’s words. It was true that if she had realized her husband’s criminal past, she would not have talked about “becoming a monk” so easily.

“But why did she lie like that...”

“If she said that she did not know, then it would mean her husband had lied to his wife for 20 years. While it was true, he was already having enough trouble revealing his illness to her. She didn’t want him to feel guilty again...I think this is the reason. There is no other way to explain it.”

“Ah...”

I sighed in admiration. If that was really true, she did not falter when told of her husband's shameful past and even lied back with a smile. As Sakaguchi had said, she really wasn't stupid.

"I think Sakaguchi realized his wife was lying, too. Her words didn't make sense, logically speaking...but there was no point in revealing this lie. He saw that it was most appropriate to accept his wife's graciousness."

It had always been like this, but I was still truly astounded by her insight. It felt like she could solve any mystery as long as it had anything to do with old books.

I stared at the side of Shinokawa's face. She talked a lot about books during the past three weeks, but I didn't know much about her personally. All I knew was that she liked old books, and liked to talk about anything relating to them. I suppose that she, like Sakaguchi Masashi, found it difficult to express herself.

That didn't matter, I guess. At this point, I felt happy too.

"I should head back to the shop then."

I had left the shop to Shinokawa's little sister. She would probably be upset that I hadn't come back yet.

I got up from my stool only to have my movement stopped. Shinokawa's pale fingers were tugging at a corner of my shirt. She looked at me with a worried expression.

"...What is it?"

Suddenly, I felt my entire body heating up. This was a first for me. I sat down on the chair again.

"If I, like Mr. Sakaguchi, had been hiding something, what would you do?"

"Eh...?"

"Would you want to hear it?"

It seemed she read what I was thinking. I was doubtful. What was

she going to say?

“...I would want to hear it.”

I was confused, but still answered firmly. She checked that the door was shut, and slowly whispered.

“Mr. Goura, you asked before... about my injury.”

“Ah, yeah...”

“Two months ago, I paid a visit to my father’s friend’s residence. It was a house built on a slope, and I suddenly slipped on the way up the stone steps. It was raining really heavily...so I told them that I had just slipped.”

“...But that isn’t that what happened?”

She nodded. We were now somehow close enough that our heads were almost touching.

“I’ve never told anyone else this... but can I tell you, Mr. Goura?”

“...Yes.”

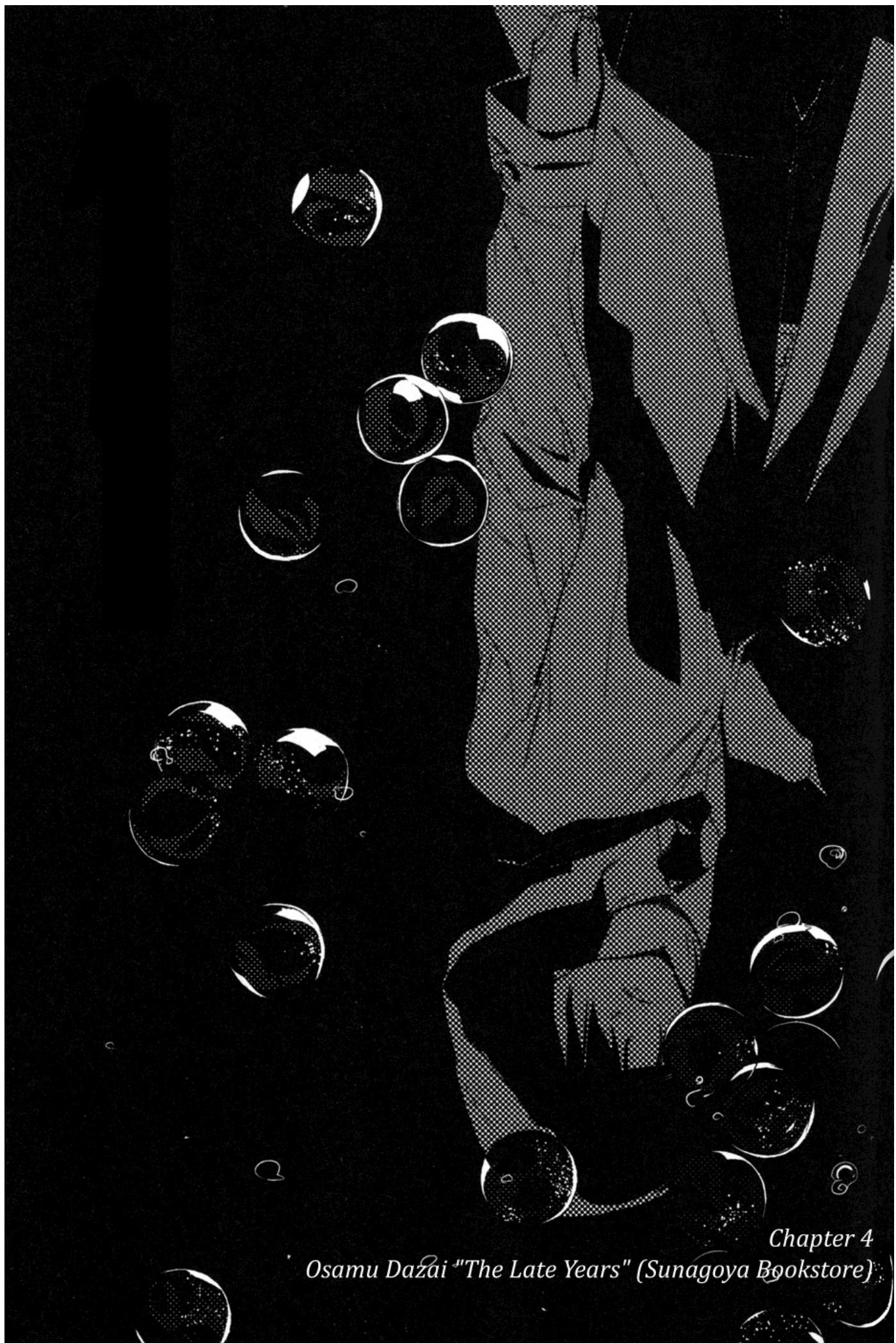
I answered. My heart was being faster. It felt like I was about to hear something terrifying for some reason.

“Someone pushed me down those steps that day. I’ve been looking for the culprit for the past two months.”

Shinokawa stared at me, and her eyes were filled with determination—it was the expression she had whenever there was a mystery to solve.

CHAPTER 4

OSAMU DAZAI, THE LATE YEARS (SUNAGOYA BOOKSTORE)



Chapter 4
Osamu Dazai "The Late Years" (Sunagoya Bookstore)

Before anyone realized, it was pitch black outside the window, and the other colors seemed diluted, as if dissolved into the scenery. A sudden evening shower descended like it was midsummer.

With the shop devoid of customers, I arranged the contents of the glass case, and at the same time listened to the sound of rain falling on the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. The wagon stacked with 100 yen paperbacks was covered with a waterproof sheet. I looked over at the nearby Kita-Kamakura Station platform, and saw that people were waiting for the buses under the platform's roofs. Only a few of the boarding platforms were sheltered, however.

I noticed that there were still books scattered on the counter, and as I hurried back into the shop, the door leading to the main house opened. A 16 or 17 year old girl appeared, dressed in a T-shirt with a wide hem and jeans. Having washed her face after returning from school, her bangs were blown dry, and tied up with a band. This girl was Shinokawa's little sister, Ayaka Shinokawa.

“Ahh, it's raining!” she exclaimed.

In the past, she would have rolled her eyes at the sight of me, but recently, we've become rather friendly. Recently, I felt like her attire had become a little too unreserved around me, and it made me worried about her. Had she completely forgotten that I was an outsider?

“Any customers today?”

“Not many... it's a weekday today,” I answered as I continued with my work in front of the glass case.

“Doesn't look like we're doing so well. Our shop's not going to close down, is it?”

I merely frowned at her calm, yet ominous statement and said nothing. I started working here a month ago, and even I noticed that sales had decreased. Besides, it had been two months since the shop owner, who should be the one doing the sales, last appeared in-

store. It was no wonder things were slow.

I placed a book, wrapped in wax paper, on the shelf. The cover, which was slightly faded and whitened, was imprinted with the title *The Late Years*. The yellow paper wrapper around it announced recommendations from Haruo Sato and Masuji Ibuse.

“Eh? That book!?”

Ayaka Shinokawa yelled out in surprise.

“Isn’t that the expensive book we had in our house a long time ago? Who’s the author again? He’s famous. D—Da—Da...”

“Dazai Osamu.” |1|

I helped her finish what she wanted to say. This was the collection of Dazai Osamu’s first works, published in the 11th year of the Showa Era—but sadly, I didn’t know what they said, since I couldn’t read.

“So we’re selling this one too? My sister used to insist that she would never sell this book no matter what happened. Are our sales really that bad?”

I glanced at the girl’s face through the reflection of the glass case before I locked it.

“...Were there any customers that wanted to buy the book recently?”

“Nope, not at all,” she said, shaking her head sideways with a little laugh. “You sound like my sister now. She would always ask me that too...to let her know right away if any customers showed interest in the book. So is there something going on with it?”

“No... not at all,” I lied.

The details were a secret between Shinokawa and me.

Shinokawa’s younger sister was right beside me, staring at *The Late Years* behind the glass. She then muttered, “...this is from the safe in

my sister's hospital ward."

"Oh, well..."

"Has this book always been so clean...?"

I stopped what I was doing for a moment. Although she didn't resemble her older sister much, she was unexpectedly sharp. She noticed things that didn't occur to me right away.

"The edges were a lot dirtier the last time I saw it, I think."

I didn't want her to get involved in this. How could I stop her from looking into it further...? Just as I was thinking about what to do, a blue-white light flashed outside the shop, followed by a tremendous clap of thunder.

"Ooh!"

Ayaka Shinokawa let out a strange cry. She didn't sound shocked, but rather amazed. Ayaka tottered over to the glass sliding door, and looked up at the dark, thunderous clouds.

"That was amazing. It must have landed nearby!"

There were a lot of hills in Kita-Kamakura; it was not an uncommon sight for the metal towers built on the peaks to be struck by lightning.

My thoughts somehow went to Shinokawa, hospitalized. Right now she must be looking up at the sky alone in the hospital ward. Maybe she didn't like the lightning. On that day two months ago, Shinokawa was pushed down some stone steps. It was a stormy day, just like how it was now.

I learned Shinokawa's secret a week ago, right after the Sakaguchi couple left the room.

"...You were pushed down? What do you mean?"

It was hard for me to immediately comprehend when she suddenly said something like "pushed down".

“Before I go on, there’s something I want to show you.”

She undid the first button of her pajamas as she said so. Her collarbone was clearly visible just below her head. I widened my eyes and my body stiffened, and she reached her hand into her chest right in front of me.

She took out a little key she wore on her neck, and handed the key to me, the warmth of her skin still lingering.

“...Please take out what’s in the safe.”

She pointed to the safe beside her bed. There was certainly a small safe under the rack, but it never occurred to me that there could be something inside until now.

I followed her instructions, and opened the safe. There was a rectangular object wrapped in purple fukusa¹² that felt very light in my hands. I sat back on my seat, undid the wrapping, and uncovered a book sleeved in wax paper. Inscribed on the cover was the title *The Late Years*, and a recommendation by Satou Haruo was printed on the sleeve.

It was in considerably good condition for an old book, and I could tell it had been handled with care. *The Late Years* was a title that sounded familiar and if I remembered correctly—

“*The Late Years* is the debut collection of works by Dazai Osamu. This is the first edition, which was released by Sunagoya Bookstore in Showa 11.”

I nodded. I had never read it before, but it did seem interesting.

“My grandfather obtained this book from his friend. My grandfather handed it down to my father, and my father to me. It’s not for sale—it’s part of my personal collection.”

I tried flipping through the pages, and quickly noticed there was something wrong. A number of the pages were stuck together and it didn’t look like there was any way to read the book one page at a time. I had never seen a book like this.

“Was this book printed incorrectly?”

Shinokawa shook her head. “It’s uncut.”

“Uncut?”

“Books are normally printed like this first, and have the top and side edges cut off afterwards. An uncut book is one that was released before it went through the cutting process...it was very common to see books published like this in the past.”

“Then how do I read it?”

“You cut it open with a paper knife before you read it.”

I see. As I marveled at this, my hands stopped flipping—that meant that nobody has ever read this copy of *The Late Years* before. Was it because it was a very valuable book?

“Huh...”

I found something strange again. Just when I flipped to the inside cover, I found fine writing written there.

To all living things, live on with confidence

We are all to become sinners.

The name *Dazai Osamu* was written on the side. Suddenly, the book gave off an ominous feeling.

“Is this... the real thing?”

I knew the answer before she nodded. This was obviously different from the fake signature I saw in *Sōseki’s Complete Collection*. It felt as if an author from the past, whose name was the only thing I knew of, had suddenly come to life in front of me.

“*The Late Years* was published when Dazai was 27 years old. It’s an anthology of previously published short stories, but there was no story titled *The Late Years*.”

“Then, why is it called *The Late Years*?”

“Dazai intended for it to be his defining work when he wrote it. He

and a woman tried to drown themselves together before he became active as a novelist. It was at Koshigoe, which isn't far from here. Of course, he went on to have many other suicide attempts.

I knew about that part. I heard he jumped into the Tamagawa Canal together with his mistress.

"There were only 500 copies of the first edition printed. These beautiful books were all released in uncut form, and each one had a cover to go with it, as well as a signature. I suppose there are no other existing copies of this edition left... I have no intention of doing it, but if it were sold at our shop... it would be sold at over 3 million yen."

I gulped. Up until this point, I had never touched such an expensive item, let alone a book.

"But to me, the value of this book has nothing to do with the price. What Dazai Osamu wrote on the inside cover is the most important thing to me."

looked down at Dazai's handwriting one more time. *To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners*—the characters were written in thin, shaky letters. The word *sinners* looked like it was written with more force than the rest of the sentence. I couldn't explain why, but the words had an impact on me.

"He must have written those words to encourage an acquaintance when he gave them this book. This particular line can be found in other signed books...the word *sinners* must have been weighing heavily on his mind at the time. Although that line does not appear in this book, it does show up in a short story titled 'Seagull'."

I mouthed the word *sinners* over and over again.

"...Is he saying that everyone is evil?"

"Not necessarily. My understanding is that as human beings, we are all sinners..."

So he was saying that since we were all sinners anyway, we may

as well live with pride—it was hard to tell if he meant that optimistically or pessimistically.

“I like the line because it feels like he was referring to himself. Then again, I tend to like lines like that...”

My eyes went wide. This was my first time hearing Shinokawa talk about her own thoughts. Her ideas on sin were unexpected... perhaps it had something to do with her love of books.

“There is someone who likes this line, too, a zealous fan of Dazai... that man pushed me down the steps.”

She lowered her head and stared at her legs, outstretched to the front.

“...Who is that?”

“I don’t know his real name or who he is... the only thing I could conclude was that he wanted this, *The Late Years*.”

I didn’t notice the light of the sun outside beginning to fade as Shinokawa calmly explained what happened to her.

“As I said before, this book is not for sale. It’s something I got when I inherited the shop. My father told me that I could do whatever I wanted with it when the time came... but I always kept it inside the house, and never showed it to anyone else... except for once.”

“...Once?”

“Do you know of the Museum of Literature in Hase ¹³ area?”

I nodded. I went there once. The building, a modified old Western-style house, displayed original drafts of famous works and other artifacts related to the authors. It was clearly a museum for literature, and it was the tourist attraction of Hase along with the Kamakura Buddha.

Last year was the centennial of Dazai Osamu's birth,¹⁴, and the Museum had an exhibition. The Museum asked if they could display my copy of *The Late Years*, so I lent them the book."

I vaguely recalled hearing about this somewhere—or rather, I saw it somewhere. Either way, I knew about this.

"I might have seen this on the internet. It said that our shop lent some books for the exhibition..."

That was when I first started work here. When I searched for the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia on the internet, I found this post in a forum full of old book hobbyists. They were probably referring to this copy of *The Late Years*.

"Yes, that is the one..."

Shinokawa's face showed a gloomy expression as she nodded.

"The Museum hid the fact that it was our bookstore who lent the book, but someone discovered it. My grandfather and father would sometimes show this book to customers visiting our shop. The problem is that a lot of people now know that I have the book. I received an email after the exhibition ended."

She opened her laptop, and the LCD backlight brightened the dim room a little. I stared at the screen, and saw an anonymous email sent to Shinokawa.

To Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia, Miss
Shinokawa.

Hello, my name is Yōzō Ōba.

*I was passing through Kamakura a few days ago, and happened to see Dazai Osamu's *The Late Years* at the Literature Museum along the way, courtesy of your shop. It was a breathtakingly beautiful book, and the words of advice written together with the signature were captivating.*

To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners.

Please sell the book to me immediately and keep this email anonymous. Please reply to this email with the sum of money you want, your bank account, freight method and all related information.

“...I thought it was a prank when I first saw this.”

“Eh? Why?”

I could not help but interrupt. The message was filled with excitement, but there didn’t seem to be anything strange about it.

“Because of this name. Oba Yozo... this is the name of the protagonist in the short story *Petals of Buffoonery*, which was one of those collected in *The Late Years*.^[5]”

So that was how it was. I nodded. So this was a fake name.

“It was also strange that a deal involving so much money was not made through phone, but by email... either way, I had no intention of selling the book. So I wrote a reply, stating that this book wasn’t for sale, but part of a personal collection. Then, I got another email less than 5 minutes later.”

She pointed at the email folder; the next email was titled *Please state your price*, and it seemed he just decided to go ahead with negotiations. She then pointed at the next message, titled *The importance of that book to me*. Then, she pointed at the next one—and at this point, I felt a chill on my back.

Oba had sent hundreds, no, thousands of emails in that folder. I don’t know many pages went by before we finally reached the last page. He had the obsession of a stalker, but directed at a book rather than at a person.

“I did discuss this with the police, but these emails alone weren’t enough for the police to get involved. He’d used a free email

account from overseas, and they couldn't ascertain his identity... when I was wondering if I should just ignore him, he came to the shop."

At that time, the rainy season hadn't ended yet, and I was alone in the shop. A man in a suit carrying a large tourist's bag bent down and entered through the sliding door.

I couldn't see his appearance clearly as he had a large mask and sunglasses on. He was very tall, and he didn't seem very old.

"My name is Ōba Yōzō"

He gave his name softly, took out a bundle of cash from his bag, and left it on the counter.

"There is four million yen here. Please sell the book to me."

He tried to persuade me.

*"My desire is to collect the first edition works of various authors, but the first editions of Dazai's works are especially important. This copy of *The Late Years* with its author's words inside would be perfect for a collector like me. I'd buy it at any cost."*

I was shocked and I only just managed to cut him off, before returning his money... I repeated what I said in the email, that this was a book my father handed down to me, that I was personally attached to it. That I absolutely would not sell it to him. After I said that, he asked me:

"You won't let go of it no matter what?"

...I told him yes, and he leaned his body forward.

"I'm attached to this book too. No matter how many years, or how many obstacles, I will get my hands on it."

And then he left. I felt very tired all of a sudden... he would certainly come by again, and I didn't know what I was going to do to convince him.

That day, after I closed the shop, I went to my father's friend's house that was nearby. I was going to return a book my father borrowed when he was still alive... it was raining heavily that day, and I was hurrying up the stone steps. I was using an umbrella, holding his book in my other hand. I was practically looking only at my feet at the time.

Just when I was about to finish climbing the stone steps, I found that man standing right at the top. I raised my umbrella, and just when I was about to lift my head and see his face, he pushed my shoulder.

I lost my footing and rolled all the way down to the bottom. My body couldn't move at all, and I realized that I was seriously injured. I wanted to call for help, but my state of mind was fuzzy... I heard the sound of someone walking down the steps.

“What? You didn’t bring the book?”

I heard dissatisfaction in his voice. The rain was very loud, but I could tell that this was the voice of Oba Yozo. His voice was very unique, deep yet clear... somewhat like yours, Mr. Goura.

“Where is it?”

I finally realized that he was after *The Late Years*. Of course I wasn't going to hand it to him.

“I hid it in a safe place. I'm not telling you where it is.”

I spoke with as much strength as I could muster. Actually, I locked it in a cupboard, so it wasn't really safe... I just wanted to keep that book away from Oba's clutches as well as I could.

It seemed Oba wanted to say something else, but the sound of a car approaching came from afar. He hurriedly whispered into my ear.

“Don’t tell anyone about this. If you do, I’ll burn your bookstore. Stop being stubborn and hand me that book over quietly... I will contact you again soon.”

That was all I could remember, and I found myself lying on the hospital bed when I woke up. I never told anyone else about this, and I put *The Late Years* in the hospital ward's safe. There are people in the hospital all the time, so it's a lot safer than leaving it in my house. He never contacted me during these two months, and of course, I never contacted him...

“H-Hang on a second.”

I, who had been listening silently up till this point, interrupted Shinokawa.

“In other words, you never told the police either?”

“Nope.”

I was shocked by her attitude; she seemed to think her answer was obvious

“Why? You were nearly killed...”

“Because I have no idea who and what kind of person Yōzō Ōba is.”

“Because I have no idea who or what kind of person Oba Yozo is,” she answered. “Even if the police start to investigate, they can't arrest him immediately. If he finds out that I reported it to the police, he might really burn the bookshop or something... I know he's determined, and I want to completely eliminate the risk of losing the shop.”

“B-But, if you leave that kind of person alone...”

“Yes, so if he appears at the shop again, then I'll call the police. This whole time, I've been thinking of what to do in this room.”

She suddenly lifted her face, and her gaze behind her glasses was filled with intense willpower. Her dark eyes were wide, just like it was in the moments before she unraveled all book-related mysteries. She reached her hand over and clasped mine tightly.

“Can you help me to lure Oba Yozo out? I don’t know what will happen, but you’re the only person I can ask, Mr. Goura.”

Her white hand was very warm, and I was rooted to the ground, thunderstruck. You’re the only person I can ask; the line echoed in my ears. It was probably rare for an introverted person like her to open her heart to someone else. Not to mention, she was asking me directly.

“...Alright. I’ll help you.”

Of course, my answer was a definite yes—I nodded and held her hand tightly. Her slender fingers were completely enclosed within my fist.

“Thank you... erm, sorry... for getting you involved in this...”

“It’s fine...but allow me to have one condition.”

“...Condition?”

She tilted her head.

“Can you please tell me what’s in Dazai Osamu’s *The Late Years*? I’ve never read it.”

Her expression immediately brightened, just like whenever she saw a book—no, perhaps she was smiling brighter even than that. Affected by her, I smiled too.

“Of course... I’ll definitely tell you about it after this is all over.”

Our relationship was maintained through books. It was a relationship between one who wanted to talk about them and one who wanted to hear about them. After a lot of conversations in this ward room, all the while maintaining this baffling relationship, we somehow seemed to have closed the distance between us. At least, I had become a reliable person she could trust, and of course I trusted her too.

“Then, how do we lure him out?” I asked.

Oba Yozo also must have considered the risk of getting arrested by

the police, and he would definitely try to avoid contact with us as much as possible.

“Oba Yozo wants to get this book no matter what. Did you know that a thief broke into my house?”

“Eh? ...Ahh, yes.”

I remembered Shinokawa’s little sister mentioning this in passing when I just started working there. The thief didn’t steal anything, if I remembered correctly.

“I don’t have any proof, but I feel like that was related to Oba... he figured he would steal it rather than make a deal for it. By then I had already moved *The Late Years* here.”

I felt it was likely, too. Oba Yozo would go to any lengths to complete his objective, and naturally that included breaking into people’s houses.

“Right now, the thing he really wants to know is where *The Late Years* is... so to lure him out, we need to set up bait.”

“Bait?”

Shinokawa took out another cloth covered package from the mountain of books beside her. She unwrapped it and pulled out yet another book wrapped in wax paper. My eyes went wide. It was *The Late Years*, sleeved in yellow—an exact duplicate of the book I had on my lap.

“Is that another first edition printing?”

It too was in an uncut state. Wouldn’t that mean it was also incredibly valuable?

“No.”

She shook her head.

“This is the Home Library Promotion Publishing (HOLP) reprint from the 1970s... a replica. It is hard to determine if it’s the real thing without looking inside.” |6|

I stared at the reprinted version of *The Late Years*. As a book, it looked similar on the outside; no, the reprint's version had firmer pages, and there were fewer stains on the cover—I felt it lacked the antique feel and gravitas of the original.

“...Will someone think of buying it even if it’s not the original?”

“The reprint is similar to the original version; there are some hobbyists who would want to read it. It was made with a lot of attention to detail, though there were many releases... even though I have the first edition, I still bought a few reprints.”

“Is that so?” I was a little skeptical, and she continued.

“Please price this book at 3.5 million yen and place it in the glass case at our shop. I’ll update the news on the shop’s homepage, stating that the first edition of *The Late Years*, in perfect condition, is in stock... once he knows that the book he wants is up for sale, Oba Yozo will surely come to our shop to buy it. He would come by once, simply to check the condition; if he does, please call the police, Mr. Goura.”

I understood what she meant. This reprint version would be the bait to lure out Oba. We could use the real one as bait, but it might get snatched away. This sounded decent, at least—but would things turn out the way we want so easily?

“But I don’t know what Oba looks like.”

“If there is a tall and unfamiliar customer requesting to buy this book, he’ll be the one. Not many people can spend 3.5 million yen just on one book.”

“But what if a regular customer wants to buy it?”

“Then please tell the customer that the book was already sold. We can’t allow a reprint version to actually be sold for that price.”

“And what if Oba makes a call to inquire?”

“Then please pretend to not know anything and tell him ‘I placed

it in the glass case according to the shopkeeper's instructions. We do not accept mail orders'. Then the only way for him is to come in person."

I folded my arms once she finished her words. I didn't mean to nitpick, but there were risks in our plan, and I just wanted to put to rest as much unease as I could.

"Then, Shinokawa, can't you wait till you're discharged?"

"...Why do you ask?"

"Because he might end up doing something reckless. While he might come to the shop, there's a chance he could come to the hospital and hurt you."

She seemed to be taken aback by this, and her expression was a little stiff.

"You can't run like this, right? It would be better to do this plan once you can walk just like before... right...?"

My voice diminished; Shinokawa's hands were clenched as they rested on her lap. Did I say something wrong?

"There is no point waiting... even if we wait, the situation isn't going to change in the slightest," she said hoarsely.

"Eh?"

"I didn't just get a fracture... my spinal nerves were damaged, and the doctor said that there will be lingering problems after I'm discharged. It'll be a long time before I can walk how I used to. Possibly... I may never get to walk freely for the rest of my life..."

The atmosphere in the ward seemed frozen.

The rain continued to fall outside.

Dazai Osamu's *The Late Years* was placed in the glass case with a tag beside it: *3.5 Million Yen, perfect condition, includes signature—*

though it was in fact the reprint version.

I stood in front of the glass case and reflected over Shinokawa's words. What happened to her legs shocked me as much as the issue regarding Oba Yozo.

I may never get to walk freely for the rest of my life.

She did not want the police to interfere, wanting to find Oba herself so that she could settle things personally.

Shinokawa's little sister had gone back inside to the house, and I was the only one present in the shop. She did not know anything about Oba Yozo, but of course she knew how severely injured her older sister was.

Speaking of which, when I first came to this shop, she put me in a choke hold whenever I asked about Shinokawa's injury. This was surprising, considering how she'd rattle on about other things that I didn't even ask about, but perhaps this was her way of expressing concern.

Shinokawa said that what bothered her the most was whether she could hide the Oba issue from her little sister.

“My little sister’s personality is that she can’t keep things to herself... maybe she’ll tell someone else, and more importantly, if Oba appears, she won’t be able to handle him calmly.”

In other words, I looked more calm when speaking, and I could be firm when talking with him. I felt a little tense, but the announcement regarding *The Late Years* was already uploaded to our shop's homepage. The way things were, Oba could appear at the shop anytime now.

The door opened violently, and I jumped.

“What’s with that scary expression?”

I relaxed my shoulders; the one who appeared was Kosuga Nao. She was the girl who stole *Monument Gleaning + Saint Andersen* from the

book hunter Shida last time. It seemed her love of reading awoke after she returned the book and apologized to him, and she would occasionally come by the shop since then.

She was dressed in a half-sleeved blouse and a uniform skirt. This was the first time I saw her in a school uniform. Like Shinokawa's little sister, she was studying at the high school I graduated from.

"I have to go to a friend's house to prepare for the culture festival, but it suddenly started raining... let me shelter here for a while, yeah?"

She entered the shop while talking in that boyish manner of hers, and the water droplets dripped down the ends of her short hair. I hurried to the back of the counter; it would be bad if the books got wet. From the inside house, I retrieved a towel and threw it at the girl standing in front of the glass case.

"Use this."

"Sorry, and thanks."

Kosuga Nao received the towel cheerfully and wiped her hair as she peered into the glass case.

"Oh, is this the rumored book worth 3.5 million Yen?"

"When did it become a rumor?" I asked in surprise.

"Oh, that's just how I thought of it. I saw this on this shop's website last night... even if it's not the first edition, you can still buy this book elsewhere, right? Will anyone actually buy such an expensive book?"

"...There'll be people who'd want this."

One person, at least, though that was an anonymous fanatic stalker.

"Hm..."

She seemed to have lost interest, and turned her back towards the glass case as she looked at me.

“Speaking of which, has Shida-sensei passed by here recently?”

“I haven’t seen him this week.”

“I think he’ll come by here. I think he wanted to discuss a purchase.”

Ever since the book theft incident, Kosuga Nao and Shida had maintained a mysterious relationship. I heard that they would borrow books from each other, and would occasionally share their thoughts at the riverside. Kosuga admired Shida’s knowledge of book-related issues, and started calling him sensei. Having suddenly gained a new student, Shida was tentative, albeit somewhat delighted.

“When’s the culture festival?” I asked. Now that she mentioned it, they usually began preparations once summer break ended.

“Two weeks from now, from Friday to Sunday. If it’s convenient for you to come by...”

But then something occurred to her, and she turned to look outside of the shop unenthusiastically.

“...Do you still remember that guy named Nishino?”

I frowned. There was no way I could forget about him.

“Ahh. What did he do now?”

That classmate who pretended to be friendly with Kosuga, but actually hated her. I only talked with him once and didn’t come away with a good impression of him.

“Once summer break ended, the news that he rejected me and said all these bad things about me spread around the school. Everyone even knew he gave my phone number and address to some stranger. Did you tell anyone from our school about what happened last month?”

“Hell no. I never told anyone.”

Not a lot of people should have known about this; besides the two

parties involved, the only ones who would have known were Shinokawa, Shida and I. And nobody was eavesdropping on our conversation—

“...Ah.”

I looked back to the door leading into the house. Now that she mentioned it, Shinokawa’s little sister had been nearby when Shida came to the shop and talked about Kosuga Nao. Shida never mentioned the book theft, but I guess he mentioned the name Nishino. I remembered Shinokawa saying that her sister was really bad at keeping secrets. This was troubling.

“Sorry... someone else might have heard by mistake.”

“Ah, it’s fine. Don’t worry, I was never going to hide it,” she said, shaking her head. “Nishino’s very popular, but apparently he had said some really cruel things behind other people’s backs too. The news involving me spread so quickly, and all the girls in our year ignored him... it seems he’s had a hard time getting along with the boys. That guy has been practically alone ever since then, and it seems like he’s left the light music club...”

I’ve seen guys who were very popular in school have their reputations plummet because of certain incidents; it was even scarier when a bunch of girls ganged up on them. I could only say he got exactly what he deserved.

“I pass by Nishino looking bummed in the hall sometimes, and somehow I don’t really feel like gloating. I feel bad, actually, that this happened because of me...I wonder why?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much if he hasn’t said anything to you himself.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I think I could understand why she felt like that though. It was because that boy, Nishino, no longer meant anything to her personally. There was none of the bravado she had when she went

to apologize to Shida.

“...Hm?”

Kosuga Nao suddenly narrowed her eyes as she looked outside the window. I followed her actions and looked over to where she was staring. There was still a downpour outside the window.

“What is it?”

“Someone was at the road just now, looking over here, but he ran off.”

I immediately walked out from the behind counter, ran down the narrow aisle, and opened the glass sliding door. The large droplets of rain continued to fall upon the pavement, and there was nobody I could spot on the opposite side. Perhaps he turned the corner.

“What kind of person was he?”

“Well... he was dressed in a raincoat, and had a hood on... so I couldn’t see his face clearly. It’s probably a guy though. Did he do something?”

“...It’s nothing.”

I closed the sliding door silently. No ordinary customer would run away like that.

Perhaps Ōba Yōzō had appeared.

“I waited a little while after that, but that guy never came to the shop.”

It was the second day, and I was in the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. The weather today was exceptionally bright and not many customers came by in the afternoon. I was alone in the shop as always with *The Late Years* replica just as it had been yesterday. Currently, I was on the phone.

“Erm...are you alright?”

I heard Shinokawa's weak voice from the receiver. She deliberately made her way to the corridor on the wheelchair, and made a call to the shop.

“What do you mean?”

“...About bringing the book back with you... after the shop closed.”

Then I understood.

Last night, after closing the shop, I brought the reprint copy of *The Late Years* to my house in Ōfuna and stored it in the safe my grandmother used to run her business. If Oba Yozo snuck into the shop when the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia was closed, the plan to lure him out with the reprint would fail.

“Don’t worry. Nothing happened.”

I was a little nervous; there was a possibility that I could have been attacked during my trips, but I didn’t see anyone suspicious.

“I am really sorry... for getting you involved in this...”

“Don’t worry about it. I told you I’d help, after all.”

“Erm... please do not push yourself too much, Mr. Goura...if anything happens to you, I would...”

I instinctively tightened my grip around the receiver. What came after “I would...”? I pricked my ears, listening carefully, only to hear the sliding door being opened.

“Ah, it seems that there’s a customer here... I’m hanging up for now.”

And so I did. It was really a pity to hang up like this, but I had no time to worry about it. Perhaps Oba Yozo had appeared. With the receiver in hand, I looked over.

“Hello, Mr. Goura! Ah, are you on the phone? Keep talking, don’t mind us. Just continue on. There’s nothing big from us here!”

The shrill voice pierced my brain, and there appeared a petite

woman with a bright one-piece skirt and an aging man wearing sunglasses. Both of them entered the shop, their arms locked together.

“It has been a while. Sorry to trouble you the last time.”

The man—Sakaguchi Masashi spoke. They were the Sakaguchi couple. Mr. Sakaguchi had wanted to sell his copy of Vinogradov/Kuzmin’s *Introduction to Logic* once, and his wife came over to take it back. Their ages and personalities were very different, but they got along well with each other.

“Welcome. Is there anything you need?” I asked.

I could see that Sakaguchi Masashi was not wearing a business suit, but something else; he did not have a tie, and he was dressed in a jacket and very creased pants.

“I just retired from my company a few days ago, so...”

“We’re going to request passports! Since we never took a honeymoon trip...”

“...We intend to go to Europe for a week.”

“We thought we should drop by and say hi before we leave! We just visited the shop owner at the hospital before coming here.”

“O-oh, I see...then, thanks...”

My brain was a little jumbled by this explanation from utterly contrasting voices. Suddenly, Sakaguchi Shinobu spoke seriously.

“We want to see all sorts of things together now that we have the chance...before Masa’s eye disease worsens. The doctor said...”

“Shinobu.”

Sakaguchi’s clear voice rang, overpowering his wife’s voice.

“Don’t call me Masa. Even when we’re travelling.”

“Ah, my bad.”

Teehee. Shinobu chuckled as she covered her mouth. But it didn’t

seem Sakaguchi was too unwilling to be called this, and it wasn't them but me who felt a little awkward as I watched. Their arms were locked together since they came in, and they didn't seem like they'd break away anytime soon.

“I really want to thank you and Miss Shinokawa.”

Sakaguchi stared at my face from behind his sunglasses. The color of the lens were darker compared to when we last met.

“If I had not met you two, I wouldn't have been able to reveal my secret.”

“Ah, that's not exactly...”

I was a little embarrassed to receive his thanks so directly. Also, though they said “we”, they should be thanking Shinokawa only. She completely understood the reasons behind everything back then, just from a single copy of the Introduction to Logic and a little bit of conversation she chanced upon. I was just standing beside her, looking amazed.

“Well then, I guess it's about time we left.”

After talking for a little while, the Sakaguchi couple passed through the glass door. I found that the wife was walking a little faster, and I noticed that their arms weren't locked together just because they were close. Sakaguchi Shinobu was pulling Sakaguchi Masashi along, whose eyesight was weaker than it was before.

“...Please come by when you have the time.”

I called out while facing their backs. Both of them returned a smile and walked out of the glass door. Just when I was about to continue my work—

“Hey, what are you doing squatting down there? Are you alright?”

Sakaguchi Shinobu's voice rang as she stood outside the glass door. There was still another person outside.

I hurried out of the shop—and then, the man dressed in a raincoat

turned away from me and dashed off. Watching his strides, it seemed he was relatively young, but as he did not have his hood on, I could only discern his hairstyle. His hair was short, not dyed, and didn't seem to have any features that stood out.

“Hey! Wait!”

I yelled, but he did not stop, and subsequently disappeared around the corner. The shop was still open, so I couldn't chase after him. I turned back towards the Sakaguchi couple.

“Did you see that man's face just now?”

For an instant, both of them turned to look at each other.

“...No, he was crouched at the sign, and his back was facing us.”

Sakaguchi Shinobu pointed at the rotating signboard.

What was he doing down there? I spun the sign over, and found it was splashed with some smelly liquid. Some volatile chemical, or—

Gasoline.

My face went pale. The sign was soaked in gasoline, and on a closer look, there was a small item dropped near the base of the sign. It had to be something the escaped man brought along.

It was a disposable lighter.

“...I think it's better to explain to the police what happened up until now regarding Oba Yozo.”

I spoke into the receiver to Shinokawa, who I was just talking to earlier. I sent her an email, and requested that she call me back.

“It would be too late if the shop was burned down.”

It was an hour after the Sakaguchi couple left. I shuddered to think what would have happened if those two were not around. This whole shop might have been ash by now.

“Hm... that might be a good idea... in light of this...”

Shinokawa murmured as she pondered.

“However... there is something that bothers me.”

“What is it?”

“Did Ōba Yōzō really do this?”

“Eh?” I exclaimed into the phone. “What do you mean?”

“Ōba probably thinks that the book is in the shop, so why would he do something that would endanger the book he wants to get?”

At that instance, I did not know how to answer.

“...Maybe he planned to start a commotion first, and then use that chance to steal it.”

“If he wants to instigate an incident, there are all sorts of ways to do this without putting the book at risks... you could stir something up outside the shop, or something.”

“But he’s still the only person who could have done this, right?”

I didn’t really understand what was bothering her. I thought all these were absolutely trivial details.

“Right... then may I leave it to you to contact the police?”

“Yes, I’ll—”

I suddenly whiffed an intense stench. Something was burning. I lifted my head, and there was black smoke covering the outside of the glass window.

“Damn it!”

I threw the receiver down and grabbed the fire extinguisher I prepared beforehand. The white powder spurted out noisily from the tube, muffling the smoke that had risen all around.

Perhaps it was because the fire extinguisher was so old that the flames were not doused. The powder began to lose momentum before the flames could be stifled, and just when the flames seemed about to overcome it—*please no*, I thought, but then the flames were

finally extinguished, and the smoke was the only thing left

I heaved a sigh of relief and looked over. My vision was blurred because of a fog hanging in the hair, but I managed to find a man dressed in a raincoat, standing at a telephone pole ten steps away. He must have been the one from earlier.

“...Ōba?”

The moment the man heard me, he took off, pushing off the telephone pole so hard he could've knocked it aside. There was no doubt he was the culprit, the man who injured Shinokawa, the man who wanted to burn the shop down. There's no way I was losing this chance. I dumped the fire extinguisher as I gave chase.

I thought I'd catch up right away, as I was still confident in my legs—but, he was faster than I was, and the distance increased slowly. He was right in front of me, but I wasn't sure I could catch him.

“Damn it...” I said, gritting my teeth.

But then, two bicycles appeared at the fork. One of them was a commuter's bicycle with a large and broken basket, while the other was a high-speed cross country bicycle. Their riders were a bald man and a man pretty like a magazine model, respectively—the book hunters Shida and Kasai.

The fleeing man almost crashed into Shida's bicycle.

“Watch out!” Shida shouted.

The man suddenly stopped for a moment to avoid crashing into the two. I took advantage of that to quickly grab hold of his raincoat.

“Let go of me!”

The man turned around, trying to dislodge my fingers, but I do have a dan in judo. I grabbed him by his wrist and kicked his feet out from under him, before slamming his back on the asphalt road. Then I held him down and restrained his movements above his

shoulders.

“Behave yourself! Ōba!”

I pushed him hard as I yelled. I peered at his face, and close-up, he was a lot younger than I imagined him to be. I could say he was in his teens, and there was still some innocence left on his face. Though this was the first time we’d met—no, taking a closer look, I feel like we’ve met before.

“Who the *hell* is Oba?! You’re pushing too hard, you asshole!”

The boy groaned in pain, and my eyes widened. His hair had been dyed black again. I realized that the person I was restraining was Kosuga Nao’s classmate—the boy called Nishino.

Events went smoothly after that.

The police hurried onto the scene, whisked Nishino away, and performed investigations in front of the shop. There was no damage other than the burn marks on the signboard and the fire extinguisher powder making a mess of the road.

I didn’t have to ask Nishino why he did this, because he had a lot to say before the police arrived. Leaving aside the insults and slander, his whole rant could be condensed to a single sentence.

Shida, Kasai and I were surrounding the counter in the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia. They just so happened to arrive at the shop to discuss books with me, and accompanied me as we waited for the police to leave—they even watched over the shop while I was explaining the situation to the police.

“Yeah, guess so,” I said, sighing.

What happened to Nishino was—he became isolated by the other students at school, because someone learned some private things and started rumors behind his back. Of course, he suspected Kosuga Nao, though there were “other culprits”.

Upon seeing Kosuga Nao talk with me so easily, Nishino realized that I was the man who spoke with him during summer break, and “realized” the answer. He decided that only I knew that about him revealing Kosuga Nao’s personal information, and so I was the culprit. He said he didn’t really want to burn the shop down; he just wanted to take revenge on me.

Upon seeing Nao Kosuga talk with me in a rather earnest manner, Nishino realized that I was the man who spoke with him during summer break, and finally ‘realized’. He knew that I was the only man who knew that he revealed Nao Kosuga’s personal information, and deemed that this man was the culprit. He said he did not intend to burn the shop down, but he just wanted to take revenge on me.

“You didn’t realize from the start? You’ve met before, haven’t you?” Shida asked.

“He was blond the last time I spoke to him.”

I guess he only bleached his hair during summer break. The school rules forbade students from bleaching their hair, and he dyed it black before September.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing you caught him. There might have been no end to him if you’d let him go,” fumed Shida.

He was in a foul mood for a while, because Nishino told us his plans after setting fire to the shop. He was going to do the same to Kosuga Nao’s house, and if that happened, the fire might not have been as successfully put out.

“Anyway, isn’t this matter settled now? He’s taken away by the police now.”

“Anyway, isn’t everything settled? He’s been taken away, and all that,” Kasai said, smiling, and Shida nodded in agreement.

“...That’s true.”

I wanted to smile along with them, but this didn’t mean all the

shop's issues were solved. I was back at square one regarding Oba Yozo, since it seems he hadn't done anything the past two days. The ones who came to this shop were familiar people like Shida.

I sent an email to Shinokawa, telling her about Nishino's arson attempt. Because of the situation, I didn't tell the police about Oba. I planned to make a trip to the hospital later and discuss what to do going forward.

"Oh? Isn't this the first edition of *The Late Years*? You managed to get a book like this?" Shida exclaimed as he stood in front of the glass case.

"Well... this actually belongs to the shop..." I stammered. Kasai might not know books too well, but I didn't want to show this to Shida, who had a keen eye for them.

"You have a look at it too, Baron. It's not often you get to see an uncut first edition book."

"Huh. Is it really that valuable?" Kasai approached the glass case, too.

"Are you kidding? I mean, of course it is... wait. Isn't this just a replica?"

His voice, agitated, rang through the shop. Were we found out? I clicked my tongue privately; after all, we never could've have fooled Shida.

"So you can tell?"

"Of course! The pages are too fresh! Why are you selling this? You don't need to price a reprint this high, do you?"

"Well... about that... we didn't display the real thing for safety's sake, so we put up the replica instead..."

My explanation was vague, and Shida expressed obvious doubt.

"That's a strange thing for this shop to do... anyone could tell this is a fake immediately. At least dirty the cover a little."

“It looks just like the real thing to me, though.” Kasai stood at the glass case, his hands on his hips, his head tilted forward. “Where’s the real one being kept?”

“With Shinokawa at the hospital.”

“So it’s just lying in the ward? That’s too careless.” The creases on Shida’s face deepened.

“There’s a safe in the ward room though.”

“...Let me tell you something.”

Shida leaned his body towards the counter, and my eyes automatically avoided his gaze.

“It’s very unnatural for an antiquarian bookshop to put up a fake. I don’t think Miss Shop Owner would deliberately attempt to fool a customer... is there something else going on?”

“No, it—it’s nothing...”

Shida ignored my reply and continued, “If it’s something I can help with, I’ll lend a hand. You guys helped me out once, after all.”

“I’ll help too, though I don’t really know much about books,” Kasai said cheerily.

I pondered this for a moment. Wouldn’t it be great to get these two in on it and enlist their help? Or should I discuss it with Shinokawa first? She doesn’t want to include any third parties besides me. In this end, this is her personal issue.

“...Please let me think about this for a moment,” I said. Just then a cellphone vibrated softly.

“Ah, sorry. I think it’s a customer.”

Kasai’s phone was ringing. He lowered his head and passed through the sliding door. Once outside, he started talking on the phone. I could clearly hear him state the price of a game console; a customer seemed to want one.

Shida and I stared at Kasai's back. He was about my height; he was taller than the door frame, and through it, I couldn't see above his ears.

"...The Baron seems a little weird today," said Shida nonchalantly.

"Really?"

"Because he pretended not to know about the first edition of *The Late Years*; how could he not?"

"I thought he didn't know much about books? He's said that before."

He'd previously stated that he was unfamiliar with them, as he mostly traded in games and CDs.

"I'd say that's just him being humble. Can't you tell from his name? He's the Baron, you know?"

I wasn't following. Wasn't the Baron a nickname Shida gave to Kasai based on his appearance, or something? Seeing my bewilderment, Shida sighed, evidently amazed.

"To hear the phrases *book hunter* and *Kasai*, anyone who likes books in this industry would have realized... but never mind, I can't blame you for not knowing."

"What's going on?"

"How can Kasai be a real name? It's just a cool-sounding name he gave himself."

Suddenly, I felt a chill up my spine.

"You've seen that guy's card before, I suppose? Kikuya Kasai. That's the protagonist's name from Toshiyuki Kajiyama's *The Many Exploits of the Book Hunter Baron*. The main character is a book hunter, just as its title implies. That's why I call him Baron."

I never imagined the name would come from something like that. But there was something that worried me. Someone else introduced himself as the protagonist of a novel—someone just recently.

Oba Yozo—the protagonist of a short story in *The Late Years* anthology.

I shook off the thought. No way... how could that be possible?

“Have you known Mr. Kasai for a long time?”

“No, not too long,” said Shida, shaking his head.

“Didn’t I tell you, when I came by in the summer, that I’d only recently met him? We haven’t even known each other two months.”

It was two months ago that Shinokawa was injured. Suddenly I saw a stranger in place of Kasai as I stared at his back. Not that it meant anything necessarily, but Kasai was a lot taller than an ordinary person.

Shinokawa had said that Oba Yozo was rather tall.

“...Does he live around here?” I did not look away from Kasai as I asked.

“He does, but... his story’s a little complicated. He and his family are from the Hase area, where apparently his ancestors are buried, and they were originally very wealthy. But they became buried under debt pretty quickly, and by his parents’ generation they had to sell their house and leave Kamakura. He lived for a little while in Tokyo until he returned to Kamakura for work.

My ears pricked up when I heard the word Hase; that was the place where the Museum displayed Shinokawa’s *The Late Years*. If his ancestors’ graves were all there, he must have paid visits, and it would be natural to visit the nearby tourist attractions while he was around.

When Shinokawa told me about Oba Yozo, I felt the situation was a little suspicious. Oba did not make any contact with Shinokawa these two months—he might have threatened Shinokawa into handing over *The Late Years* at first, but there was no way he could get the book without further action. What had he been doing all this while?

Maybe he had been doing what he needed to. First, he built a relationship with Shida, who knew Shinokawa, and kept an eye on the movements of this shop. After that he became acquaintances with me, the employee. Of course, all of this would have been to discover the location of *The Late Years*, and then take the book.

Of course, this was simply my imagination. I did not have any proof, and I couldn't ask leading questions to find more.

All I could do was to try and get more info.

I walked away from the counter and cautiously approached Kasai. He was thanking the other party and ending his call. When he slipped his phone into his pocket, I pretended to talk to him normally. People tended to relax when they end calls.

“So, hey, Oba.”

Kasai tilted his head and turned to me. Unfortunately he wasn't careless enough to answer “yes”.

He just pointed at himself and said, smiling easily, “I'm Kasai.”

His voice was clear, and my body froze in place. *So it's him after all*, all my doubts became conviction; I shook my head slowly.

“No, you're not Kasai. You're Oba Yozo, but that's not your real name either.”

“What are you saying? I don't follow. What's the matter?”

He probably realized I was trying to get him to slip, so his plan was to keep insisting that he wasn't Oba—but he wouldn't throw me off that way.

“*What made you think I was even talking to you?*”

I pointed at the road; there was a housewife passing by, going to do her shopping. Anyone would think it was someone else being addressed if they heard an unfamiliar name. If he really wasn't accustomed to it, his response wouldn't have been so immediate.

The silence lengthened, and the man before me narrowed his eyes

slightly.

“...How unexpected. I didn’t think you were a famous detective like that woman, too.”

Kikuya Kasai—Oba Yozo—spoke with a mocking tone, and I glared at him wordlessly. This man severely injured her. *This person is unpredictable, I told myself.*

I was preparing to seize him when he muttered, “Can’t be helped,” and ran away.

He got on the bicycle parked beside the shop and took off at breakneck speed. I watched his large back disappear into the evening dusk. I was dumbstruck by his quick getaway, but then a chill flooded my entire body.

“Please help me watch the shop!” I called to Shida, whose eyes widened. I took out my cellphone and ran to the motor scooter parked in front. Now that he was in the open, Oba’s next step was obvious. He probably wants to get *The Late Years*, no matter what it took.

He’d asked me earlier, and I answered, carelessly.

The real copy of *The Late Years*, first edition, was with Shinokawa at the hospital.

Oba was headed for the hospital; I had to hurry up and tell her that danger was imminent. My fingers trembled slightly as I pressed the keys of the cellphone, and the instant I sent the message, I sped off for the hospital.

I was still heading for the hospital on my scooter when the cellphone in my pocket shook. I pulled it out, trying my best not to slow down. I lowered my head to glanced at the cellphone screen. It was a message from Shinokawa, and it was a very short reply.

I’m moving to the roof. Please help me buy some time.

I closed the cellphone and thought about what it said. Was she moving to the roof because the ward was dangerous? I could understand that, but why did she need me to “*buy some time*”?

I stopped in my tracks. That was Oba’s bicycle; even going as fast as I could, he managed to get there one step ahead of me. That man had arrived at this hospital.

A piece of cloth floated in front of me before I got going to the automatic sliding door. It was a purple fukusa; I waved it aside, but I found it a little familiar. It was the fukusa used to wrap *The Late Years*.

I lifted my head and stared at the building. All the windows of the wards were tightly shut, so this fukusa must have dropped from the roof. I didn’t know if it was let go on purpose, but I knew that Shinokawa would be at the rooftop. Hopefully Oba wouldn’t find her.

With a prayerful heart, I dashed through the corridor and ran to the elevator. I passed by the clinic’s front desk and found the lobby was deserted. The two adjacent elevators were headed upstairs.

I clicked my tongue and ran up the stairs. My footsteps rang loudly. In my heart, I deeply regretted letting Oba escape at the shop entrance. If only I had noticed it earlier—I ran over many platforms on the flights of stairs, and when I got to end, I kicked down the door viciously.

The concrete roof was a large, open space, surrounded by a white parapet. Night had fallen, and nobody would have come here on a whim. There were only two profiles in the darkness of rooftop.

I saw two people staring at each other; my limbs felt a little limp. One of them was Shinokawa, seated on a wheelchair, hugging *The Late Years* tightly in front of her chest. The other was the tall, curly-haired, handsome man—Oba Yozo, standing only a few steps away from her. He had found her.

“Oba!”

I was about to charge right between them, but I froze. Oba was holding a large pair of scissors in his hands; he mentioned he brought them along whenever he went. The long sharp blades were pointed at Shinokawa's face. She glanced at me with her pale face—*don't you move*, it seemed to say.

"Yes, better that he not move!" Oba yelled. "I won't damage the book, but I'll show no mercy to people."

He spoke with the "Kasai" tone that sounded showy, and yet affectionate. My mind couldn't make sense of it; when I saw him, I just couldn't believe the person speaking in front of me was really the one who pushed Shinokawa.

"...Even if you get the book, you won't be able to escape."

I tried my best not to provoke him, speaking quietly.

"Oh, really." Oba snickered. "You don't even know my real name. Once I get out of this neighborhood, even the police will have difficulty tracking me. After I change my face, I can start over again, wherever it is go. Overseas, even."

I was frightened by the sheer scale of the plan he rattled away. Thinking about how he pushed Shinokawa and moved to Kamakura...I suppose it wasn't so surprising that that he also approached the shop using a false name.

"...Do you really have to go this far just for a book?" I said, casually. Oba's expression became belittling, and he glanced at me coldly, as if staring at living trash.

"Someone like you wouldn't understand, even with this book right in front of you."

The tip of the scissors in Oba's hand were pointed at Shinokawa's *The Late Years*.

"There are very few copies of this edition, and it's practically a miracle for one to be preserved in such an intact state after being passed down. It's shocking that there are people that don't

understand its value. This book doesn't just have a story written in it; the experiences this book has been through is another story... I want that story."

I faintly felt a sense of familiarity—Oba's words felt similar to Shinokawa's words. No, that was my imagination.

"Even if you have to rip it from someone else's hands?"

"Nothing's wrong with that. As the book says, *To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners* ...this line is a guiding light to people like me. And for me, nothing matters as long as I have books. I'd give up my family, my friends, my inheritance, even my name! This is what I live for! No matter what I have to give up, *no matter how many years, I AM GOING TO GET THAT BOOK!*"

Oba roared with bloodshot eyes, and I shuddered. I thought everything would be over once I caught the guy, but he obviously wasn't going to be easy to deal with. Even if he were arrested and convicted, he might still try to steal *The Late Years* again. He would pursue me and Shinokawa for the rest of our lives.

"Her too, she's the same as me. The impression from her I get is the same... we'd feel happy as long as we're surrounded by books."

"Don't you dare associate her with you, you lowlife. You two are worlds apart."

I recalled the ward filled with old books when I said that. It was true she liked books, but there was a decisive difference between her and this man: I knew she would never hurt or deceive anyone else.

"Enough talk. How about you try telling her to give me the book?"

It suddenly occurred to me that Oba wasn't trying to force *The Late Years* from Shinokawa, afraid of blemishing the book. He knew that Shinokawa was clinging hard to this valuable item.

"...I don't have that much time."

Oba slowly brought the scissors to her face. Though he was playing safe now, he might do anything if Shinokawa didn't hand the book over. Shinokawa would be in danger; she couldn't even walk, let alone protect herself.

While considering this, I made my decision to charge at him. My priority was to protect Shinokawa, followed by *The Late Years*. There was some distance between us, but as long as I could grab a certain part of his body, I believed I could suppress him used all of his might to resist. I shuffled my feet slowly towards him and lowered my center of gravity slightly.

“Mr. Oba Yozo, I’m not really like you.”

Shinokawa, who had remained silent all this while, suddenly spoke, and I stopped in my tracks. She stared at Oba with steel in her eyes, and didn’t seem to even notice the scissors’ points. Faced with the sudden change, Oba, too, was taken aback.

“I’ve been thinking... to me, there *are* more important things than old books. So let’s end things here.”

She kicked the floor with her uninjured left leg. The wheelchair slid backwards smoothly, slammed into the parapet 1 meter away, and stopped. The distance between her and Oba had increased slightly, and when he moved to close the gap—

“Don’t get any closer!”

Shinokawa raised *The Late Years* like a shield. The texture of the paper was obviously aged, different from the texture of the reprint edition in the shop. As the veil of night gradually blanketed the roof, she flipped open the cover to reveal the inside. I could vaguely see the words written by Dazai Osamu—“*To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners*”.

“Perhaps Dazai was trying to encourage someone when he gave this book away. I don’t know how it came to my grandfather’s hands, but I’ve been severely injured because of it. You will be arrested by the police... after 70 years, this book lives in a different

age than in Dazai's day, and now it brings happiness to no one."

She reached her hand into her pajamas pocket, and took out something.

"Everything is because of this book, so—"

That clear stern voice rang through the darkness, and I shuddered. I could clearly make out what she was holding from between her fingers, and I cried out involuntarily when I realized. That was a disposable lighter.

"We'll end everything here."

"ST-STOP IT!"

Even as Oba shouted, the lighter ignited the book. The flames spread over the paraffin sleeve wrapped on the cover. She threw *The Late Years* over the parapet without hesitation.

Oba wailed as if he were being burned himself, and tried to climb over the parapet to chase after *The Late Years*. I hurried over and managed to grab Oba by his belt just before he leapt.

"You idiot! *What are you doing?!*"

The hospital was 6 stories high and certain death awaited anyone who jumped down. Even so, Oba continued to struggle and yell.

The Late Years dropped onto the roof of the entrance and burned away, smoking all the while. Its existence was no longer that of a book.

The moment Oba relaxed, I suplexed him onto the concrete floor, held down his wrist joints and exerted pressure on them. Our physiques were similar, but I managed to pin him down successfully. Evidently he never had training in martial arts.

I heaved a sigh of relief and looked over at Shinokawa. Her strength seemed to leave her as she collapsed back onto the wheelchair—I suddenly recalled the email she sent me. This must be what she was referring to when she said "*help me buy some*

time". She intended to burn *The Late Years* once she knew Oba would come to the hospital.

"...Are you really okay with this?" I could not help but ask.

I couldn't believe that she would do this, she who considered books more important than her life. After thinking it over again, she spoke resolutely.

"Yes, I am... I had no choice but to do this."

The book worth several million yen became ash and floated to the sky. As she watched it silently, I was surprised by how composed she was; it was as if she hadn't lost anything at all.

Oba would not be able to threaten her anymore. Everything was over.

"...Huh?"

Shinokawa reached her hand out and picked up something. It was a leather business card holder for men, but it wasn't my stuff, so it was probably something Oba dropped. Several cards dropped out from the folded card holder. She took one of them, and upon looking at it, her expression suddenly changed.

"Mr. Goura... this is..."

She spoke with a hoarse voice as she handed the card to me. I tried to bring my face as close as possible in the dimness of night. It was a driver's license, and though the photo was Oba's, the name was different.

"Toshio Tanaka."

So this was his real name! It was not Kikuya Kasai nor Oba Yozo. Well, it certainly was a plain name, so perhaps he'd used false names because of that.

"Eh?"

But then I was startled. A month ago, I had come across a similar name. I lowered my head and looked at this man I disabled. He was

as tall as me. I remembered Shinokawa saying that Oba Yozo had a similar voice to mine.

Shida told me that he was born in Hase of Kamakura, and that his ancestors' graves were there. If that was true, then naturally this man's grandfather must have lived in Kamakura.

"...Just to ask, is your grandfather named Yoshio Tanaka?" I asked softly.

This man called Yoshio Tanaka might be my grandmother's lover—and the man below me might be related to me in blood. Tanaka curled his lips and looked up at me.

"Yoshio Tanaka is my grandfather...how did you know?"

"..."

"The Tanakas used to run a trading firm, started back in the Meiji era. I'd heard the family business was good and busy before my grandfather inherited it. I am the only Tanaka left... just look at me now."

Toshio Tanaka spoke wryly and with a self-deprecating tone. His moustache was long, but there was a wild charm in it. Must be nice, being a handsome man.

"My grandfather named me. Isn't it terrible? He just changed his own name a little."

We were looking at each other through a transparent panel. Five days after Tanaka was arrested, I'd gone to visit him at the detention center.

According to the police, investigations were proceeding smoothly. He pled guilty to pushing down Shinokawa and breaking into the Shinokawas' house; after committing so many crimes, including distress, unsuccessful theft, and intimidation, a sentence of jail time was beyond doubt.

They investigated Toshio Tanaka's past, and found all sorts of problems—he'd worked at an antique bookstore for awhile once, stole some products and added them to his collection. After he was fired, he started an auction business on the internet and worked some scams that got him in trouble. Looks like he had a lot of criminal counts against him.

“Your grandfather... well, has he died?” I asked, after hesitating for awhile. One of the reasons why I started work at the Antiquarian Bookshop Biblia at all was because I wanted to hear news regarding Yoshio Tanaka.

“...It seems you all you ever ask about is my grandfather.”

“Ah, actually, my grandparents were on good terms with him. I think he's visited my house before... I often hear his name.”

“Oh, I see.”

Tanaka didn't look suspicious even at words like these, but just nodded.

“Grandfather died 15 years ago. That was a little while after he sold our house in Kamakura and moved our entire family to Tokyo.”

“...I see.”

In other words, nobody knew of the relationship my grandmother had with Yoshio Tanaka. It was a bit of a pity that he died without anyone knowing the details, but I was a little relieved to know that grandmother's secret would not be revealed.

“What kind of person was your grandfather?”

“He was very tall, and if you compare the photos, I look much like my grandfather when he was young. He was a nice person who took care of other people, and he had a huge set of relationships. He even knew movie stars, producers, I heard he ate and drank with them... wasn't there a film studio in Ofuna?”

I nodded as I hid my expression. I already understood what sort of

relationship my grandmother had with him.

“But the company business didn’t go so well, and everyone left. By the time I took over, our house was the only asset left. My parents worked hard, trying to earn back a little of our inheritance, so they left me in my grandfather’s care... the two of us practically spent our lives together. He really cared for me, and he talked about old books all the time. When he was young, he used to collect them, and he was the one who taught me the basic things about them... but our shop didn’t have a single old book left, at the time. He had sold them all. I started loving old books around then; but though I kept listening to him, I could never read. As a kid, I wanted to read, but couldn’t...”

As I listened, an inexplicable feeling rose within me. His childhood was somewhat similar to mine, and I involuntarily felt a kinship with him.

“Let me tell you something interesting... I’ve never told this to anyone else.”

Tanaka enthusiastically leaned over and placed his hands against the transparent panel. The police officer watching over us in the meeting room frowned but never said anything.

“Most likely, ***The Late Years*** originally belonged to my grandfather.”

“Eh?”

I widened my eyes. My response seemed to delight Tanaka, and he continued.

“My grandfather often regretted... that because of financial hardship, he sold the uncut copy of ***The Late Years*** with the signature inside it, and I think he sold it cheaply. It seemed like it really cut him up inside.”

Now I finally understood why Tanaka was so obsessed with ***The Late Years***. I guess he wanted to commemorate his grandfather through that book. I recalled the words Shinokawa said: *I feel that*

these books, handed down as they are, will carry stories in them... and not only the stories on their pages.

However, there was not a single trace of this book left.

(...Huh?)

Deep down, I felt like something didn't quite fit. I had the same feeling on the hospital roof, five days ago.

"Speaking of which, what about that woman? Is she still having fun, reading away in the hospital?" said Tanaka suddenly.

His tone was scathing, containing all his frustration. He was obviously still furious at Shinokawa for burning *The Late Years*, and I glared back instinctively.

"...Yes, she's still in the hospital. But that's your fault, isn't it?"

This man had no right to talk about Shinokawa that way. Tanaka clicked his tongue, probably without a retort, and looked away.

"I thought she wouldn't let go of the book unless I did that... she seemed to be like me in that regard. But I was mistaken. She doesn't truly love old books. Anyone who does would never have done what she did."

"What makes you so sure?"

Shinokawa definitely loved books, no matter who said otherwise. I understood such people; my family had its own bookwormy sort.

But Toshio Tanaka seemed set in his opinion.

"I can say this for certain. The way I know them, no collector would ever *burn* a book. They strive to keep them, no matter what."

You still want to argue? I wanted to retaliate, but I couldn't come up with anything.

They strive to keep them, no matter what.

The lingering sense of wrongness in my head, unresolved up until now, suddenly unraveled.

On that moment, five days ago—no, I felt something was amiss even before that. About the time “Oba Yozo” first came to the shop, about Shinokawa’s explanation for *The Late Years*.

I reflexively kicked the chair away and stood up.

So that’s how it is? There’s no other explanation.

“What is it? You don’t look good.”

Tanaka stared at my face suspiciously, and I shook my head slowly. There was no way I could let this man realize the truth.

“...I should head back now.”

I wanted to say that I would be back, but I resisted the urge. As long as the link we shared in blood stayed hidden, there was nothing I could say to this man, and there was no need for me to meet him in the future. I called out to the police officer, saying I wanted to leave the visiting room.

“I’ve been thinking, ever since I met you last month.”

Tanaka’s voice came from behind me.

“Have we met somewhere before? It’s easy for me to talk about things with you... I feel like our paths have crossed at some point.”

In that moment, I did not know how to answer. There had been crossed paths, but they were not our paths, rather our grandparents’ paths before us.

“No, we’re perfect strangers, and we never met before this.”

I knocked on the door of the ward, but there was no reply. I opened the door and entered.

Shinokawa was lying on the mechanized reclining bed, slightly lowered now. Her eyes were closed. It was a scene similar to the one I saw when I first arrived.

The gentle sunlight finally took on a tinge of autumn as it lit the

room. Her silky face and hair on her wrists were a glittering white. Thinking that she really was very pretty, I pulled up a chair by her and sat down.

The legs of the chair rubbed against the floor, letting out a screech. So much mulling over everything had left me exhausted, and it didn't occur to my tired mind to pull softly. The thin eyelids behind the glasses opened slowly.

Shinokawa perceived my presence beside her, and she hurriedly lowered her head in obvious embarrassment. She adjusted her glasses, hiding her blushing face.

"Eh, erm...sorry...I-I...didn't hear that you were coming today...so..."

"Sorry my visit is so sudden."

Her stare wavered nervously. However, this was freer expression than she'd shown a month ago, and I could understand her easily no matter what she said. I could see she was troubled.

As I pondered my words, my heart felt a little heavy.

"I went to meet Toshio Tanaka today," I said.

Her black irises twitched, and she glanced at my face. Her mind was probably thinking about all kinds of things at the moment.

"...I see."

But that was all she said. She didn't ask anything like *what did you two talk about?* so I had no choice but to continue.

"He said you were lying when you said that you loved books, Shinokawa."

"...Why so?"

"Because you burned *The Late Years*."

"...And how did you reply...Mr. Goura?"

"I asked him what made him so sure."

“...That...erm...what exactly were you discussing?”

“We were discussing whether or not you loved books, Shinokawa. What else is there?”

“...”

She suddenly went silent. My voice and manner were terse, and I felt I was clearly presenting the reason I came here. She probably realized it, too, but didn’t want to tell me so.

“Shinokawa, do you love books?”

“...I should like to think so.”

That answer was as good as telling me the truth, at this point.

I pointed at the safe below the rack.

“Can I check what’s inside the safe again?”

She did not say anything, but only undid the button of her pajamas and reached her hand into her chest. The places on her skin that daylight hadn’t tanned looked pale. She retrieved a little key from the front of her chest. I took it and used it to open the safe.

There was something wrapped with purple fukusa inside. My worries had been confirmed.

I returned to the chair, laid the package on my lap and unwrapped it. A book revealed itself under the fukusa, and the title on the whitened cover was handwritten. Two edges remained uncut. And of course, there was the sleeve.

I cautiously opened the cover, and found the small handwriting on it—*To all living things, live on with confidence. We are all to become sinners.*

The copy on my lap was the first edition of Dazai Osamu’s *The Late Years*, supposedly ashes.

“I guess this one here is the real *The Late Years*,” I said. It was not a question, but a statement of fact. “The burned book was a fake.”

“...How did you know?”

Shinokawa’s voice was feeble.

“At first, I felt some things couldn’t be explained. Why...”

As I started the explanation, I grimaced. This sort of introduction didn’t feel right. She had always been the one revealing the truth, with me listening—but our positions have switched around, now. I was the one who solved this mystery.

“Why didn’t you make a police report, or failing that, couldn’t you have asked more people for help...? Even considering all the reasons you told me, Shinokawa, it was weird that we hunted for ‘Oba Yozo’ all by ourselves.”

“...”

“But what happened five days ago was the real spark. I mean... I warned you in advance through email, but why didn’t you ask the hospital staff for help?”

And she chose to move to the roof, where no one else was present. If she’d gone somewhere with people around, he wouldn’t have been able to threaten her.

“I was thinking that if all of that was deliberate, Shinokawa, all the moving somewhere nobody would be, the having a showdown with ‘Oba Yozo’... then there was only one reason for it. You wanted to show him the scene of *The Late Years* being burned. So that he wouldn’t appear again, you wanted to make sure that the memory was etched into him, to make him think that the book he wants doesn’t exist anymore... right?”

I stopped and waited for her reply, but a heavy silence drifted around. Not even a single excuse or explanation, and that infuriated me.

“But it would have been suspicious if all you did was call him over and burn the book. That’s why you made him find out where *The Late Years* is, made him come to the hospital to snatch it... Shida said

before that anyone who loves books in this industry would have known that Kikuya Kasai wasn't his real name. You'd have noticed it too, right? Of course, you knew that 'Kikuya Kasai' and 'Oba Yozo' were the same person, so you made use of the fact that sometimes visited the shop..."

I was getting to the crux of the matter, but she still committed no response besides lowered her head slightly. The quieter she was, the more frustrated I felt.

"You should have several reprint copies of *The Late Years*. When you told me about the reprints, you said that you 'bought a few'... you prepared two of those copies. One to be displayed at the shop, and one to be burned here. The book placed in the shop was an easy fake, and even your sister and I could tell the difference... 'Kasai' would've definitely seen through it, and your idea was for him ask me where the real copy is. I trusted him, of course, and told him where the real one was. Meanwhile, you made a painstaking disguise for the reprint edition you wanted to burn. You made the pages look old, and imitated the words Dazai personally penned on the inside cover... since you had the original with you, it wouldn't have been difficult to make it look the same once you had all the tools. It was evening back then, and we all thought that was the real copy because we couldn't see clearly... once we'd seen through the easy fake, the intricately disguised reprint copy looked just like the real thing. You'd planned that psychological ruse, too, I suppose? Toshio Tanaka and I both were fooled completely."

I said everything I needed to say in one go, and finally caught my breath. There should be no problem with my reasoning, and the real copy of *The Late Years* here is the most damning proof.

Shinokawa, who sat stone-still on the bed, suddenly lowered her head even further. From where I sat I could hear her cry, as softly as a mosquito might.

"...I'm really sorry I lied to you like this..."

I looked away. Of course I would be furious after being led around like this, being used as a tool so nonchalantly. However, there was another reason why I was furious: because she was important to me.

“Why must you do everything by yourself?” I said. “You should have told me that you were keeping the real copy of *The Late Years* safe and that there was something off about Kasai right from the beginning. Did you really have to take such a risk?”

Five days ago, if she had been careless, that man would have stabbed her. If I had been in on the plan, I could have lured “Kasai” to the hospital more safely, and then she could burn the book. She planned such an elaborate trap, so why did she choose such a dangerous was to execute it? That was the part that infuriated me most.

“That’s because... I thought you’d decide not to help me, Mr. Goura...” Her voice was hoarse.

“Why do you think that? Of course I would have helped you, right?”

During this one month, I’d thought we were getting along well. She liked to talk about books, and I liked to hear about them. I thought there was something a little special between the two of us and I, at least, trusted her.

“That’s because... you don’t read books...”

She uttered these words with great difficulty.

“...I thought you might not be able to understand... the feeling of wanting to keep your favorite book with you, no matter what happened. That’s because... it’s just a book to you.”

I felt as if struck by lightning. I’d said as much on the hospital roof — *Do you really have to go this far just for a book?*

Those words had hurt her. In fact, I couldn’t say that the thought wouldn’t cross my mind after I started working here; after all, I

never could get involved with books. And I didn't really understand the feelings people who valued books as much as their lives; Shinokawa saw that clearly.

“So all I could do ... was not trust you...”

Her words seemed to come from very far away, and I slowly stood up. My anger had dissipated completely. All that was left was a need to get away from here. In the end, it was me alone who was trying to build and keep a relationship.

“...Well, but it'd be hard to make that work. Bookworms mostly only like other bookworms.”

So that was how it was, Grandmother.

I didn't understand this person at all, and I wasn't someone she could trust, either.

“E-erm, I am... really sorry...”

“I'm resigning.”

“Eh!?”

She widened her eyes. Her startled response surprised me a little.

“I'm returning this to you.”

I pressed the shop key, once entrusted to me, into her palm of her hand, which lay on the blanket. Then I took a large step backward to put some distance between us.

“Mr. Goura... e-erm, I still have things to talk...”

I ignored the panic in her voice and lowered my head deeply. I didn't want to hear her apologize any further. It would just hurt me more.

“I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you in this short time.”

EPILOGUE

I resigned from the Antiquarian Bookstore Biblia just like that. Afterwards, I went to the store one last time to receive my remaining salary, but I never met Shinokawa even once since then.

My mother made quite the scene when I regressed to unemployment.

“WHAT WERE YOU *THINKING*, RESIGNING AFTER WORKING FOR JUST A MONTH? IT HASN’T EVEN BEEN LONG ENOUGH TO DECIDE WHETHER YOU LIKE THE JOB! FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE, AN UMEMPLOYED PERSON HAS ALL THE VALUE OF AN *INSECT* HERE! THOSE WHO DO NOT WORK, *DO NOT EAT!!!*”

She yelled as much as she wanted, and maybe she felt she said much when she saw how gloomy I was. Before she went to work the next day, she had left a note for me in the kitchen.

You earned enough money to eat. Calm down and look for another job.

I was bothered that she was able to say such reasonable things once in a while.

To be honest, I really couldn’t explain why I quit. Maybe it was because I felt she couldn’t trust me as a person. But as an employee, the only think I really needed was my pay. So maybe I was just looking for a relationship beyond that of a shop owner and employee. I couldn’t say if it was love, or something else. I didn’t know what that sort of relationship would even be called—between someone who loved talking about books, and someone who liked hearing about them.

Anyway, I should not expect the unreasonable from co-workers, especially older, bespectacled beauties. I kept this in mind as I started attending job seminars.

Two weeks passed by peacefully. After writing an untold number of resumes and attending as many briefings, I'd finally made it to final interviews at a food company in Saitama. Maybe things would take a turn for the better. As I was envisioning it, the phone rang. Shinokawa's sister was on the line. I hesitantly picked up the phone, and after a simple greeting...

“...How’s the store doing?”

...I asked about something that always bothered me. A store attendant suddenly resigning had to have been a major inconvenience. However, she replied quite pleasantly.

“We closed the store for now, at least until we get new workers. Oh, you don’t have to worry too much, Goura. It was already hard to keep it open without my sister at home.”

Despite what she said, I couldn’t scrub away the guilt. The store being closed was a undeniably a direct consequence of my resignation.

“Anyway, there’s something more important I want to ask you.”

Suddenly, her tone became serious.

“Did something happen between you and my sister, Mr. Goura?”

The hardest thing right now was to answer that question. I couldn’t explain everything that happened with *The Late Years*, and I myself couldn’t even understand what happened between me and Shinokawa.

“Hum, well...I guess it’s, uh—”

“Uh, I guess, uh, uh, uh... listen, did you get to touch those huge boobs?”

“*What the HELL?*”

“Look, those are some *huge* boobs. They’re shaped nicely, too.”

She was obviously teasing me. It was dumbfounding how it still managed to start up my imagination.

“...I’m hanging up.”

“Okay sorry, hold on a sec! My sister’s been acting weird recently.”

“Eh?”

“She hasn’t been reading.”

I was at a loss for words. The person who would bring in scores of books into a hospital ward? The person who would lie to everyone around her just to protect a single one? It was hard to imagine.

“Ever since you resigned, Mr. Goura, she’s been spacing out... she’s finally getting discharged after so long, but she’s been feeling down, and I’m worried. Couldn’t you pay her a visit, even just once?”

In the end, I didn’t say whether I would go or not. I simply told her that I would think about it for awhile, and hung up the phone.

For some time after that call, I couldn’t get Shinokawa out of my mind. I was worried about her mood. Was it really because of me? Could she be feeling badly because of me?

Right now, I had no intention of visiting her. She told me straight out that she couldn’t trust me, and I couldn’t just talk to her as if nothing happened. Plus, it would be impossible to talk to Shinokawa the Introvert, anyway—but it concerned me, her being down.

And just like that, my thoughts looped round and round and several days had passed before I knew it. I attended the final interview with the food company with Saitama. I felt fine about my performance, but became suddenly tired when I reached Ofuna.

I walked to the ticket gate in the Ofuna station, walked down the stairs and stepped onto the main road. We were still having an Indian summer, and the remaining light of sunset seemed to pierce through my jacket sleeves. It was technically autumn, at least.

I walked down the avenue and saw the frontmost white building, the Ofuna General Hospital. Visiting hours were probably still on.

(...Should I really go?)

I couldn't stop being worried about Shinokawa after all... but it was too late to visit her today. Maybe tomorrow would better... no, I was already here, so today might be—

“...Erm.”

A soft voice arose from a bench on the sidewalk. After walking for two, three steps more, it registered and I looked back in shock.

A bespectacled, long-haired woman was sitting on the bench. She was wearing a bright checkered skirt and a plain shirt, all covered by a knitted cardigan. It was the same plain outfit she wore when I met her a few years ago—speaking of which, this was the second time I'd met her in any outfit besides her pajamas.

“Shinokawa ...what are you doing here?”

“I—I got...discharged today...” she muttered.

She was using a couple crutches to help her stand, with places to for her to put her elbows. I moved to help, but she shook her head shyly and straightened her waist to stand properly. I heard that she was going to be discharged, but I didn't think she'd be so well recovered.

“...I thought that you would probably...pass by here.”

I felt my body temperature rise. From all appearances, she'd been waiting on this bench for me for a long time, and we just stayed standing there, several steps away from each other.

“Congratulations on your discharge.”

This was the only thing that I could say.

“...Thank you very much.”

She lowered her head as she said that. Both of us remained silent, not knowing how to carry on the conversation. Why did she come to see me?

“Did something happen?” I prompted.

She leaned on the crutch in her right hand to support her body, and handed the tote bag in her left hand to me.

“...T-This.”

“What?”

“Please help me take care of this.”

I took it doubtfully, checked the contents of the bag—then widened my eyes. There was a book inside: the *The Late Years* from before. Dazai’s signature was inside the cover, and it looked like none other than the real thing.

“W-Why *this*?”

“W-Well, I would like you to...help me keep it safe, please.”

I didn’t understand. Wasn’t this the very book she wanted to keep close to her even if she had to lie to the people around her? Did she not treasure it more than anything else?

“Erm...I want to try trusting you, I guess...”

After just squeezing out those words, she blushed—so that was how it was. I understood. She put the book she treasured most in my hands, as proof of her faith in me. In other words, this would be her proposed reconciliation. Well, it was just like her to hand over a book worth several hundred million yen just like that.

I couldn’t help but laugh. In things like this, the first one laughing loses, but whatever; she got through to me, and just that was enough.

“I don’t want this.”

I put the book back into the bag and hung it on Shinokawa’s wrist. Her expression looked somewhat strained, so I spoke quickly.

“It would be pointless for me to have this when I can’t read, so it’s better to leave it with you, Shinokawa... well, if I ever want to hold on to it, I’ll tell you then. That aside...”

I straightened my back and faced her.

“Shouldn’t it be about time to fulfill your promise?”

“...My promise?”

She tilted her head wonderingly.

“You said that you would describe the stories of *The Late Years*, didn’t you?... Did you forget our promise?”

Her face immediately burst into a sunny smile. She seemingly changed into someone else entirely, making it hard for me not to look at her.

“Sure. Please sit here.”

The tone of her voice changed, and she invited me to sit on the bench. Did she want to tell me about the story immediately? I felt that was kind of weird, but of course I had no reason to refuse. I kept a small distance from her as I sat down, a distance that just so happened to be the dimensions of *The Late Years*. However, she closed the distance by leaning over to me slightly.

I could feel her warmth from where our bodies are in contact, and my whole left half stiffened. I wondered what I’d do if she said that she hoped I’d come back to the store with her, after listening to her talk about *The Late Years*. Somehow it felt like I was going to have a steady job.

But none of this for now. Let’s just listen to her story first.

In our current positions, she looked over at me, and when she started talking, her manner of speaking was different than before.

“I think I mentioned that *The Late Years* was Dazai Osamu’s debut work, published during Showa 11. At the time, Dazai was in his twenties, and it was said that he spent ten years on this work and wrote more than five thousand manuscripts. The collected works are just a small fraction...”

AFTERWORDS

Whenever I get off at an unfamiliar stop, I will often look for an antiquarian bookshop if time permits.

Once I find a signboard at the end of a shopping street or a crossing, I will randomly enter one, and then look up at the bookshelves that reach the ceiling.

I like the atmosphere they give off, something newly published books lack. It feels like there is a thin membrane applied on them after they are passed down people's hands—of course, I do really like the hard, thin texture of newly printed pages.

There are vastly different ways to treat books; amongst those who keep their books in neat condition, some have the habit of using bookmarks, and some have the habit of removing the dust jackets. When reading through old books, my interests are not simply the contents of the books themselves, but also what kind of persons the previous owners were.

I did not know when it started, but at some point I thought of writing a story involving old books. I set Kita-Kamakura as the stage, as this peaceful place is similar to an ideal setting I wanted to write about, long ago.

On a side note, as of this writing there is no antiquarian bookshop around the Kita-Kamakura station (as far as I know). Thus, there was no clear model behind the shop the protagonists work at besides the one in my own head. I wrote this story thinking that if this kind of shop had been available during my high school years, I would definitely be a regular customer here.

However, the old books appearing in this work are real. These are all books I love, books I have memories of. I hope to write a story that can end up becoming like these books.

To all people involved in the making of this book, and to all who read all the way through the afterward, I humbly thank you.

Mikami En

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TRANSLATOR NOTES

Chapter 1

[1] In actual fact, it is more like a Buddhist temple. Built in 1929, this temple is 25m tall. More details on Guanyin in the next point. Here is a picture of it [<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/ja/6/64/%E5%A4%A7%>

[2] Note, in Japanese, they call Guanyin as Byakuekannon, 白衣觀音, literally, white-clothed Guanyin. In Buddhism, this religious figure is the Bodhisattva, or enlightened being of compassion, and is also revered by Taoists. The name, when translated, means 'The One who observes the sounds (of the world)'. A prominent god in East Asian religions. Commonly referred to as female nowadays, but was sometimes deemed a male in the past.

[3] Judo rankings. Looking at how Daisuke got a Dan at least, that will mean that he is ranked at least a blackbelt

[4] Popular Buddhist temple. Informal name of Heiken-ji, 平間寺

[5] Published in 1905-1906 as novel, this story is a satire about how Japanese society was undergoing reforms and aping Western customs

[6] Highly popular in Japan, Botchan (or translated as Master Darling) is a story that revolves around morality.

[7] 暴走族. Pretty much the biker gangs. Think Shonan Junai Gumi.

[8] Goura's given name was 大輔, while the name of the

protagonist was 代助

[9] Yokohama International Christian Academy

[10] The Japanese government's Employment Service Center

[11] Japan Self-Defense Force

[12] It's the story of a drug addict, the world revolving around her, and delves into the psychological aspects of addiction.

CHAPTER 2

[1] The original has it as sedori, 背取り (せどり), which would mean ‘spine taker or withdrawer’. ‘Spine taker’ would mean that the seller would take (取り) the book by its spine, 背表紙 (せびょうし). In other words, ‘spine taker’ would mean ‘taking the book by the spine’. Obviously, that does not fit in as well in English, so I changed the text.

[2] The temple that would best fit this description would be the Kōmyō-ji, a Buddhist temple. Incidentally, Shida would have passed through a place called Yuigahama (notable because the names of the cast in Oregairu are based on locations in Kanagawa; Yuigahama, Yukinoshita, Komachi and Zaimokuza are based in Kamakura, for example).

[3] The road leading to a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple. In this case, it is a Buddhist temple.

[4] A lucky cat (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki-neko>) is a ceramic cat statue placed at the front of many shops and restaurants. It often has a raised paw that waves around. Shinokawa has her hand raised in a similar fashion.

[5] Unlike the given name, this is actually a pretty grim story that talks about a lawyer’s failure to save a wrongly convicted person in a case of accused rape. Notably, the lawyer is the only morally upright party in the story.

[6] In case you’re wondering, this isn’t the story adapted into the American drama.

CHAPTER 3

[1] 日本思想大系, *Nihonshisōtaikei*, a series of 67 books from Iwanami Shoten (the same publisher as the Sōseki's Complete Collection in Chapter 1).

[2] Soviet Workers.

[3] Collective farmers under the unique Soviet farming system

CHAPTER 4

[1] To those who read the ‘Book Girl’ series, the first volume ‘Suicidal Mime’ was based on his work ‘No Longer Human’

[2] Japanese textile used either for gift wrapping or for polishing during a tea ceremony.

[3] <http://www.kamakurabungaku.com/>

[4] Note that this story was written in 2010. Osamu Dazai was born in 1910

[5] Also used as the protagonist in ‘No Longer Human’

[6] Original has it shortened to ほるぶ。Acronym is HOLP. As its name imply, the objective of this publishing group is to promote reading, either local works, or translated foreign works. Website: <http://www.holp-pub.co.jp/>